

天鏡のアルデラミン
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
Alderamin on the Sky
宇野朴人
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Illustration さんば挿
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カトヴァーナ帝国
周辺地図
大アラファトラ山脈
カトヴァーナ帝国
東域
キオカ共和国
帝都バンハタール
ターバイ山脈
帝国軍中央基地
南ウルト森林地帯
ヒルガノ列島
N
S
Alderamin on the Sky
Designed by AFTERGLOW

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Yatorishino Igsem
ヤトリシノ・イグセム
天鏡のアルデラミン
Alderamin on the Sky


シャミーユ・キトラ・カトヴァンマニニク
カトヴァーナ帝国の第三皇女。12歳。まだ子供ではあるが、帝室の人間らしい威厳を漂わせる。また一方で、媚びない愛らしさも併せもつ少女。運命のいたずらで、高等士官試験を受験するイクタたちと出会うことになり、彼女の運命も変わっていく。
ミル
ハローマのパートナーである水精霊。ハローマに厳しく、生活態度が乱れると率先して忠告してくる。
ハローマ・ベッケル
帝立ミン・ミハエラ看護学校の卒業生、19歳。表情も口調も柔らかな少女。押しに弱い＝優しい性格が災いして、しばしばイクタに口説かれるはめになり、よく困っている。衛生兵を志望して高等士官試験に臨み、イクタやヤトリと一緒に行動することになる。
マシュー・テトジリチ
イクタやヤトリと同輩の17歳。高等学校時代から二人を敵対視し、なにかにつけヤトリにからみ、ことあるごとにイクタにからかわれてきた過去をもつ。旧軍閥のテトジリチ家に誇りをもつが、誰にも相手にされず、悲しい思いをすることもしばしば。
ツゥ
マシューのパートナーである風精霊。ちょっと弱腰で、マシューに対して意見しきれないときがある。
サフィ
トルウェイのパートナーである風精霊。状況判断が早く、常にトルウェイに的確な助言を与えてくれる。
トルウェイ・レミオン
爽やかでシャイな二枚目、17歳。帝国でイグセム家と並び立つ旧軍閥の名家、レミオン家の三男坊。高等士官試験でのヤトリの対抗馬と目される。白兵戦術で知られるイグセム家とは異なり、レミオン家は戦列銃兵戦術を得意とするのだが……。
ヤトリシノ・イグセム
イクタとは旧知の仲の17歳。たびたびイクタの怠け癖を叱るものの、彼の才能を誰よりも理解している少女。旧軍閥の名家イグセム家出身で、文武両道。狭き門である高等士官試験において、イクタの協力で「主席合格」しようと目論むが——。
シア
ヤトリのパートナーである火精霊。寡黙で朴訥。ヤトリとは言葉不要の信頼関係を結んでいる。
クス
イクタのパートナーである光精霊。温和で丁寧。イクタに対して、やや過保護な面もある。
イクタ・ソローク
カトヴァーナ帝国に暮らす、17歳。いつも眠たげな表情を浮かべている少年。昼寝と徒食と女漁りが趣味で、周囲からは「怠け者」と陰口を叩かれている。帝立シガル高等学校を卒業し、ヤトリとともに高等士官試験を受験することになる。
Alderamin on the Sky
Characters

Prologue

There are probably two types of geniuses, Bajin thought as he ran down a poorly-lit stairway, skipping three steps at a time.

There was the hero-type who appears when the world needs him, and then there was the oddball-type who just naturally appears out of nowhere and couldn't care less about what the rest of the world is doing. Neither one was better or worse than the other. But what Bajin could say from personal experience was that when an average person spent time with the latter, his troubles were anything but ordinary.

"Professor! I'm coming in!"

Following a kick which threatened to smash the ill-fitted door, he was greeted by the usual stuffy atmosphere of the underground laboratory. Scribbled-on memo pads, boiling chips for experiments, and other things of that nature were scattered haphazardly across the floor, leaving almost no room to place one's feet.

"Whoa?! Jeez... and to think I just cleaned it up yesterday..." Bajin sighed automatically.

He quickly pulled himself back together and starting walking, though, heedless of the littered objects. What heed did he need to pay? Most of the things in this room would be left as they were, anyway.

"Professor! Please answer me, Professor Anarai!"

When he raised his voice, something moved in the deepest part of the poorly-lit room. A small yet sprightly old man appeared with a lamp in one hand. His white coat fluttered as he came into view, sticky with some kind of paint material.

"Don't shout, Bajin. I almost messed up the finishing touches, you know."

The old man was gripping a brush dipped in pale yellow paint in his right hand. Bajin frowned.

“Finishing touches, you say... Just what on earth were you doing with those painting tools?

"Oho, want to see? They aren't dry yet, though."

When he followed Anarai to the depths of the room, there were four dolls lined up colored red, blue, green, and yellow respectively. Even though you could call them humanoids, they were as tall as Bajin's knee, with large heads and small limbs. In a manner of speaking, their bodies were like deformed figures [1] to the size of two and a half of their heads.

But generally, people would not call these figures humanoids. While these beings had taken on this

shape, they were a different existence from humans altogether, having existed alongside the humans as if nothing was more natural. They were the so-called ---.

"-- four great elemental spirits... right?"

"That’s right. Made by Anarai Kahn, these are the 'artificial spirit' prototypes."

Urged on by Anarai, who gave a very satisfied snort, Bajin turned and viewed the dolls in order from the right side. To begin, the first one… was the green-painted doll. On its stomach, a round hole imitated from an actual "air tunnel" was opened. There was a breeze flowing from inside.

"This is a wind spirit isn’t it? Its power..."

When Bajin bent over and peeped through the hole, first the six propeller blades that created the circulating wind came into his view, and furthermore on the opposite side, he could confirm a small animal running continuously on a hamster wheel connected to the blades. If you listened closely, the animal made a squeaking sound.

“...is that a mouse…?”

“It was in this area, and besides, for creatures that could become a power source, there weren’t any other candidates.”

“So we’re a group that privately entrusts everything to a mouse, necessarily right?”

Bajin retorted, expressing his disappointment to the manufacturer, and turned his attention to the next "artificial spirit."

“This one is blue, so it’s a water spirit… I see, liquid comes out from the 'spout' on its body, right?”

“The parts of its head and body use an open-close system. You can open it and look inside.”

As said by Anarai, when you exposed the 'water spirit’s' insides, first there was a small water tank inside the head. In the water tank rocks were layered from coarse pebbles the size of eyes to fine sand, and muddy water gathered above that. Not only did clear water seep from the filter paper that was spread on the very bottom of the water tank, it poured into a pipe directed to an organ that resembled a faucet, which would be called a 'water spout' if it were a real water spirit.

“...this is certainly it. It’s what the professor made a long time ago, the 'filtration mechanism', was it?”

“That’s right. With this arrangement, impurities are filtered from muddy water, and we are able to acquire clean water.”

Bajin tasted the water collected in the teacup placed under the faucet and creased his eyebrows.

“...Professor. This water, reeks awfully of mud though.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem in terms of drinkability, but it seems like there’s an issue with the filter paper’s strength and fiber density.”

While amazed at Anarai, who spoke casually, Bajin placed his gaze on the neighboring spirit. Outside the color, there was a point where it different from the other three, and there were caps worn above its hands which were raised as if performing a banzai.

“The next one is a fire spirit… so that means as expected flames come out of the 'fire chambers' on its hands?”

“Umm, go look.”

As he removed the round caps covering hands, Anarai smoothly took flints from his lab coat pocket and struck them in the 'fire spirit’s' immediate proximity. The very instant he wondered whether sparks were produced when the rocks clashed, the force of the fire expanded exponentially and burned through the air.

“Ahh! That’s dangerous!”

“Inside this 'fire spirit,' distilled oil of high purity is gathered. As you know, when you neglect the substance called oil, it slowly volatilizes… that is to say, it evaporates. The oil evaporates from holes opened in its hands, so I gathered that inside the caps and lit the fire, that’s the reasoning.”

“Rather than an explanation, please consider the pros and cons of trying that inside a room covered with flammable things!”

While brushing off his lightly burned coat cuff, Bajin looked at the last of the 'artificial spirits' with watering eyes. Same as the wind spirit from the start, there was a hole opened in the center of its body, and a mysterious, faint light was coming from that place, which was capped with glass.

“A 'light cavity' in its body… a light spirit, right? But this light, just how…”

When Bajin, taken with curiosity, brought his face closer and peeked at the inside of the hole, on the opposite side of the thin glass cap, countless black shadows wriggled busily. The instant he realized what they were, the several hundred things releasing small lights from their tails, goosebumps stood on Bajin’s entire body and he drew back.

“These, aren’t they light insects? What a gross sound, where did you capture this many!?”

“What do you mean by gross sound! Before being emotionally disgusted, if you’re my assistant, look at the true nature of things. These insects, you see, are living proofs which teach us that a light unaccompanied by 'flames' and 'great temperatures' is not a privilege only of light spirits.”

“N-no, that might be true, but…”

Trying his best to chase away the afterimage of insects burned into his retina, Bajin eyed the face of his teacher, who was shorter than him by one head.

“...Professor. To be honest, this time I suffered understandingly.”

“Uh huh…”

“It was the objective of making these 'artificial spirits,' you see. I know that Professor has researched and observed spirits for a long time, but what are these ridiculous sub-par imitations supposed to do? I can’t think of anything other than thoughtlessly provoking the Cult. Don’t tell me that you really thought you could artificially reproduce the existence of spirits.”

“You, too, think that’s impossible, do you?”

“It’s difficult isn’t it? At the present time, we can’t even produce a single insect.”

Without even refuting that harsh opinion, Anarai gazed motionlessly at the four prototypes he had created. He couldn’t measure the wise old man’s thoughts, but right now Bajin didn’t have the time to carelessly guess at them.

Without saying anything, Bajin turned to Aranai and thrust at him the paper he had been tightly holding in one hand the whole time.

“...what is this?”

“You should have a vague idea; it’s a final warning from the Church of Alderah! Time is precious so I’ll read and summarize the contents for you… ‘To Anarai Kahn, Blasphemer of God. In spite of even repeated warnings, the field of research has until now exceedingly misaligned to God’s will, those behaviors have greatly departed from God’s forbearance. By midday in three days, bring the results of your wickedness in their entirety and surrender yourself to the temple. If not so, friend and doomed sufferer of the severe punishment for having committing heresy, then until next time’...”

With Bajin having read this far, Anarai cleared his throat and gave a sarcastic laugh.

“Again Blasphemer of God, I’m rather disliked by the people of the Cult…. so we necessarily have to take responsibility for the research results here and within three days go to the temple to beg for forgiveness?”

“That’s how it is. We’ve had warnings several times until now, but this time the temperature is clearly different. Not mentioning three days from now, even tomorrow, the steel-cane-wielding heresy interrogation building may knock on this door.”

“If they’re serious, that is possible. We who’ve lost the patrons we were fortunate to have will be rescued from capital punishment.”

“This isn’t someone else’s problem, you know…. Up to now, even I, the lowly 'Apprentice of Anarai,' was resolved to follow you to hell from the beginning, but…. Professor, what do you plan to do from now?

That was asked by the assistant in a serious tone, and Anarai breathed a sigh and viewed the inside of

the room.

“...in the place this world has become, the eyes of God are shining. Unsatisfied with merely everything on Earth, one by one, books’ contents and words- until He arrives at people’s hearts, that God will keep watch for us from the heavens.…”

“...”

“If that is uncomfortable, as the ones who launched this research room…moldy and dim, yet our dear sanctuary, we can at least wish, ‘I want to forget God,’ even only while researching. Now shall we place the wrath of God in front of us like candle where the wind blows?”

“I’ll guess at your intention. The Cult’s theologists, will not understand your 'science,' however you explain it. ‘For all logical foundations, God must exist’... By just blindly believing those kinds of commandments from the Alderah Theology, you can’t firmly recognize the research of genuine truth.”

“Right, 'science'... the study for people who lament God’s guidance. This and that, it’s everything we studied here.”

The moment Anarai impassionately muttered, the bell dangling down from the roof sounded a shrill warning. After that, the iron door that separated the space creaked at a rough knock. The two tensed their entire bodies and exchanged glances.

“...So they came without waiting a day after they sent the warning, did they? As we anticipated, they’re a quick tempered lot.”

Grumbling in an amazed voice, Anarai turned his body and walked halfway to his own desk. There, he took a short pause, changed his mind, and unexpectedly began tidying up.

“--Bajin, we’re stopping this business. Let’s abandon it, not including the data, which I’d quite like for to remain. What? The results are all stored in our minds, learning isn’t picky about location to begin with. As for what’s next, let’s escape more cleverly from the eyes of God as much as we can.”

“Y-yes!... But Professor, do you have any prospects? No matter where we run to in this country-- the Katjvarna Empire, wouldn’t the Cult come pursue us persistently?”

“I just said that learning isn’t picky about location, but the prospect doesn’t have to be in the Empire. The neighboring Kioka Republic has as much capacity as to champion the founding of an artisan nation and accept people like us.”

“Kioka…!? They’re the neighbors we’re in the middle of a war with! Do we have the connections to seek asylum?”

“There is a considerable number of ‘Apprentices of Anarai' even over there. Using my correspondence so far, I’ve established negotiations. Your walking stick before you stumble[2], right?... Now, Bajin, where is your fire spirit friend?”

“R-right. Raga is burning trash in the rear incinerator now, but…”

“There is fire in the furnace then. Good timing- there are things I'd hate for to be confiscated by those closed-minded folks. I’ll have you go ahead and stoke the fire. That's all this ‘’unwelcome’’ person will ask of you.”

Having received his instructions, Bajin rushed out from the back door and hurriedly climbed the stairs leading above ground.

After seeing off that back-turned figure, Anarai turned his eyes to his own desk and took up a massive quantity of papers carefully bound with string using both arms.

“The records of my talks with my apprentices, scattered throughout the world… If it were reasonable, I’d want to take these to Kioka. But with this amount, I think that’d be difficult…”

With his eyes he gazed at several letters, and while muttering the names of the senders one by one, Anarai slowly climbed up the stairwell. Just for now, he didn’t care about the pursuers quickly approaching there. For an old dog, they barely equaled the letters sent by distantly scattered sons and daughters.

“Yorga was absurdly strong in arithmetic. Milvakiah was a lover of extreme logic. Nazuna was one who could simplify and explain difficult arguments and just wanted to be at hand as an assistant. Ikta was…”

The moment that name left his mouth, the voice narrating the story slightly weakened. Rather than nostalgia, or fondness-- concerning the owner of that name, the memory of pain took precedence within Anarai.

“Ikta Solork, without interest in following the method of 'science' I advocated, implemented sublimation by a peculiar philosophy. He was a sensitive kid similar to you, Bada. You can have pride in the shadows of the grave.”

As he finished climbing the stairs, when he opened the iron window installed to the brick wall, the incinerator on the other side was already blazing thunderously. Overcoming slight hesitation, then throwing a sheaf of paper into it, Anarai, in front of the several memories returning to ash, stood still with a solemn expression.

“Until these circumstances settle down, it’s a brief farewell, 'Apprentices of Anarai.' Soon, let’s make sure to meet again. Next time, I pray, in the midst of a wilderness of reasoning to which God’s eyes cannot reach.”

When he finished the farewell, Anarai closed the incinerator window, turned his heel, and didn’t look back a second time.

Year 904 of the Empirical Era Anarai Kahn, "scientist" of the historical beginning, escaped the Katjvarna Empire with one assistant. Thereafter, continuing research at their destination for



asylum, the Kioka Republic.

The Empire at Twilight

In the Katjvarna territory, the four seasons basically don't exist. It's the tropics.

There is no spring nor autumn, and, of course, no winter. There is only the season when the general of summer seriously attacks, and the one when he slightly loosens his hand. One could call half of the Empire's history the history of the fight with this brave general.

Therefore, between the slender and tall dipterocarp trees-- the figure of somebody fast asleep with his body entrusted to a hanging hammock was possibly the form of humanity's triumph against the general of summer.

"Ikta, please wake up, Ikta."

A small, lovable humanoid "something" climbed aboard that someone's chest, which rose and fell with the breathing of his slumber, and shook the body eagerly. A large face and short limbs, a round form, a "light cavity" in his body. That form was undeniably a light spirit, one pillar of the elemental spirits which served as the good partners of humanity.

"...Nnn…what is it, Kusu? Didn't I say I'd sleep through the graduation ceremony?..."

Taking off the hat that shaded his face, the somebody took up the light spirit called Kusu with both hands. He was a black-haired, sleepy-eyed youth. The shirt and navy blue pants worn on his body were unrecognizably misshapen, but it was possible that they were a uniform that in some way matched with the hat.

"So, it ended."

"...Hmm?"

While staring up and down at the spirit held in his arms, the sleepy-eyed youth-- Ikta tilted his head.

"If progress was as planned, the Imperial Segal Grand Academy's 131st Term Graduation Ceremony ended just about now, and they should be shifting to the Communal Meal between graduates and guardians. Would it be unwise to have a meal here?"

Hearing that, Ikta casually turned his gaze to the skies, and, indeed, the sun had risen considerably compared to when he looked before he slept.

"Certainly, this is terrible. Let's miss this meal, even though it's free."

Ikta, having sluggishly lowered his body from the hammock and stood on the ground, stretched widely. His back cracked, his sleepy conscious just then awoke, and all at once his hunger and thirst

attacked.

"Ugh, I have a headache… light dehydration, I wonder?"

"It's because you slept a long time in this heat. First, let's stop by a well and replenish our water supply."

Ikta brought the body of Kusu who so advised him to the special pouch he attached to his own hip and snugly stored him there. For the slow-footed spirit, that was the default position during travel.

"Well, shall I endure it just a little? Just for today, since it's a waste to quench our thirst with tepid water."

After quickly retrieving the hammock from the tree trunks, Ikta, even while grimacing from his headache, started running through the inside the forest in high spirits.

"I'm Yahg the physical education instructor, congratulations on your graduation, Miss Igsem. Ah, the High Grade Military Officer Exam is drawing closer before you. I think that you of all people will definitely pass, but don't relax even a little alright?"

"I receive your advice gratefully, Instructor Yahg. I'm thinking of putting the things I learned here to best use in practice."

After the graduation ceremony, the Academy president's long speech, having calculatingly joined forces with the fierce heat, actually sent eight students out to the medical room. Finally, Yatorishino Igsem of those who moved to the Communal Lunch under the grand pavilion as per the schedule, not being able to dine properly, was savoring the annoyances of being an honor student.

"Oh, Yatorishino-kun, congratulations on your graduation. I'm Kobakk from educational guidance. As expected of the top of her class. Are you also expecting the same results from the High Grade Military Officer Exam?"

"Thank you very much, Instructor Kobakk. I wish devote my whole energy to meet expectations."

--The top student understands it, even without you guys saying. So let me go already!

While she continued the unpleasant reception, in actuality, nothing but that was repeating in her mind.

If they came just to congratulate her on graduating, that would still be okay. There was no helping that she felt unhappy that, after words of congratulations, each and every one of the instructors added their own names. Furthermore, that type of people generally, in school life up to now, was a group with weak connections to Yatori.

Afraid of being forgotten, they tried to make even a small impression from the start. It was a ridiculous idea. But still, as the top of her class who combined her character with wisdom and

courage, she had to take on a manner devoted to etiquette.

"Ah, alright! The second serving of ice cream is here!"

Yatori's ears twitched at the detail exclaimed by another student in the near vicinity…. Ice cream!

As might be expected from the congratulation of the graduates of the Imperial Grand Academy, fancy cuisine to match the occasion was lined up on the tables of the assembly hall. Fish fry covered with plenty of spices, meat soup boiled with a mountain of spices, mixed rice boiled together with so many spices that you'd die. The flavor of spices, which were used for the purpose of sterilization, seasoning, and metabolism acceleration, was an essential characteristic of Katjvarna. Since Yatori was accustomed to the stuff itself, she didn't mind it.

However, she just now came from the president's long speech. She was all out of such things like sweat, and the temperature of her lips, dry and papery, surpassed the normal by two degrees. Eat foods with plenty of spices and accelerate metabolism → sweat and get a refreshing coolness- there was no need for her to undergo so irritating a practice as she had been until now. Yatori's body desired a more direct "coolness."

One way or the other finishing the conversation with the instructors at an appropriate place, she turned to the direction of the voice from earlier and started walking with a quick pace. Ice cream--that was undeniably the most appealing sound to anyone in this country.



In Katjvarna, far from the snow and never even having had frost fall, the only ones that could make the precious gem called ice were the water spirits. In addition to that, they couldn’t make a lot at once, and the majority of it circulated as an industrial coolant. The luxury of "eating ice" was a pleasure only for days with special, joyous things.

Given out to many hands, the remaining amount now was in a precarious state. Yatori, barely enduring the urge to starting running despite doing nothing but praying that enough for her remained, finally arrived in front of the plate.

She breathed a sigh of relief without thinking. The ice cream on top of the large plate was really only a small amount, which if scraped together and served on a small plate would finally be enough for one person. It was by a hair’s breadth…. While imagining the coolness of the ice slipping down her throat, she placed a hand on the serving spoon-

"Ah."

Her fingers, as they took the spoon handle, overlapped with the fingers of a youth trying to reach for it at the same time.

"...Ikta."

"Ah, Yatori. Congratulations on graduating. As expected of the top of her class. I’m proud to be in the same year."

While giving the false compliment, the black-haired youth resistantly put strength into the tightly gripped spoon. Yatori also did the same. Grappling with the spoon from left and right, the two squared off in front of the plate.

"...You, didn’t show up at the graduation ceremony right?"

"Well, that was rude of me. My heart was always together with everyone."

"I have no interest in the your peculiar, conveniently detachable heart. So, where was the main body?"

"Overpowered by sleep in the forest behind the school. I couldn't help worrying about how many people collapsed this year."

"Eight people were incapacitated by listening.... So, you, who for some reason skipped the graduation ceremony, only show up for the Communal Lunch like nothing happened?"

"Because of this, there was no lunch today in the dormitories. Even if you let me sleep through the graduation ceremony, dining is compulsory."

"Like I’d accept your excuse. Anyway, remove your hand."

To Yatori who ordered in a threatening tone, Ikta shrugged his shoulders and gave a villainous smile.

"To think that the world-famous top graduate can't concede one plate of ice cream to another person…"

"Ngh."

"I'm disappointed… The teachers would probably be disgusted. To think that the someone such as the eldest daughter of the Igsem Family would be so shameful…"

Drawn out by the reference to her family's honor, strength gradually left Yatori's hand. Ikta, having successfully stolen the serving spoon, gleefully served the remaining ice cream on a small plate.

"As expected of Yatorishino Igsem. Her pride higher than a mountain, her heart larger than than the ocean. It seems I truly have a good friend-- Ah, ow!?"

The moment he brought the filled plate to his body, a tingling numbness ran through Ikta's left arm. Without drawing attention, Yatori's quickly dispatched fist hit the nerves in his elbow. Firmly catching the plate slipping out of his hand mid-fall and claiming it as her own, Yatori gave a triumphant smile.

"Thank you for going out of your way to serve it for me, Ikta-kun. A gentleman does things ladies first."

"The result is the honor of receiving of your praise."

Ikta retorted despite having lost the argument, rubbing his elbow with tearing eyes.

"...Mm~m."

The coolness and sweetness spreading in her mouth, the scent of cinnamon leaving her nose, the sensation of ice cream thawed by her body heat sliding down her throat. Yatori was shivering at sensuality of those things while mindlessly holding the spoon in her mouth.

"I'm being restored to life. Ice cream is the best."

"That's so true isn't it? On the other hand, I'm hot and about to die. No, I've been dead for a long time."

With a drink in a porcelain cup in one hand, Ikta was slouching on a bench set up in a corner of the party hall. He was glaring resentfully at Yatori's blissful expression with a sidelong glance.

"How exaggerated. The palm wine is chilled in itself, isn't it?"

"The alcohol[3] is weak and it wasn't fermented enough. Therefore, I won't acknowledge this stuff as alcohol."

Despite saying that, Ikta, with a large jug of palm wine placed on his bench, was draining the contents of his cup and pouring himself several refills from there. When his thirst was finally quenched, he came with both arms filled to capacity with food from the tables and began eating incessantly.

"Nng...mmm.… Considering that this is a party for the Imperial Grand Academy, the quality of the food being served is equal to the Empire's dignity. The reality that it's declining is an alarming thing, you know, Yatori-kun."

"Be quiet. Because normal students- unlike you, who slips in every year- only attend once, the quality of the food isn't something they care about, you know."

While speaking, Yatori carried the last spoonful of ice cream to her mouth with a trace of regret. She absentmindedly gazed at the table, but there was currently no sign that more would come. She couldn't help but be reminded of Ikta's speech.

"Damn, I guess that was the end of this year's ice cream. In any case, it's because the price of the milk and honey sprinkled on top of the ice, which is produced directly in the kitchen, seems to have risen quite a lot since the year began."

Thus complaining, Ikta, as if giving into despair, swigged palm wine.

Stored in the pouch on his waist, his partner, the light spirit Kusu, raised his eyes appearing anxious about the circumstances.

"Ikta, drink alcohol moderately. It's harmful to the body."

"I guess so, Kusu. Opportunities in which I can drink enough to harm my body are rare, you know."

While watching that usual back and forth between the two, Yatori innocently brought her hand to her right hip and caressed the face of her partner being stored there. With "fire chambers" in both hands, he was the deep-red fire spirit Shia.

"It seems you're having difficulties as always, Kusu. Shia is worried as well."

"Thank you very much, Yatori. Shia has blessed with a responsible master."

"Agreement."

After speaking only that with a sigh, Shia became silent for a second time.

He seemed cold, but considering the two, he was closer to a spirit's standard mode. A spirit's personality was shaped by accepting his master's influence, but ones with communication abilities as high as Kusu's were rare, and spirits attached to soldiers were especially liable to becoming uncommunicative.

"Ah, Yatori-sama! Congratulations on graduating at the top of your class!"

Having found Yatori's figure, six students from the crowd came to encourage her. Certainly not handling them coldly, she answered them with a smile, the same as when she addressed the instructors.

"Thank you. Also, congratulations to you, too."

When a voice was returned from Yatori, the students who came to have a conversation, regardless of gender, became excited. Her red hair extending past her shoulders with its intermingling tips curling in and out, the pupils of her large eyes seeming to symbolize intelligence and sincerity, her stylishly-worn uniform unwrinkled by the heat. That was a figure as if dignity were painted in a picture.

With excellence in both the military and literary arts united with a personal history as a descendant of the Distinguished Igsem Family of the Classical Military Factions, Yatorishino Igsem received greater expectations and respect from students in the same class than anyone else…. But, to that extent, the companion together with in her an unbecoming situation, he was exceedingly conspicuous.

"...Umm. Possibly, are you involved with Ikta Solork?"

Sure enough, the one girl who noticed the existence of the dead drunk "unbecoming someone-san" whispered to Yatori in a lowered voice.

"Eh? No, we're just talking a bit."

"You shouldn't keep company with that kind of good-for-nothing. Stupidity is contagious."

Yatori only responded to that harsh evaluation with a vague smile. The girl continued even closer to Yatori's ear.

"...Either I'm mistaken about something, or there is a rumor that this guy is also taking the High Grade Military Officer Exam. I think that he'll fail it quickly in any case, but please be careful that you aren't distracted by him."

Yatori, being who she was, suppressed a snicker at that girl's words, but, leaving that aside, the girl quickly changed the topic

"Anyway, Yatori-sama. When will you go to actual combat as a commander?"

Since she didn't so much as take the Exam yet, there was a limit to how hasty one could be. But, of course, without revealing those kinds of true feelings, Yatori politely answered her innocent question.

"I can't say anything yet, but normally it seems that after training for four~five years, you receive a rank and from there you can handle being an official military officer."

"Four years… I hope it's much faster because you're Yatori, but I wonder if you can't make it in time."

"Make it in time…. What are you talking about?"

When Yatori tilted her head and asked for an explanation, this time a boy from behind her answered.

"Her relatives live in Katjvarna's Eastern Province. Hey… right now our[4] Eastern Stronghold is repulsing the invasion from the Kioka Republic National Army, right?"

"Yeah, Yatorishino-san was just saying how it would be fun if she went as a reinforcement."

Another boy added more. Without noticing that Yatori didn't respond, they continued.

"But still, to go that far, even the guys from the Republic would abandon the invasion. In any case, it's because the Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Stronghold is that great Hazaaf Rikan-dono. He is a little distressed now by the New Division, whose status is unknown, but he'll bring it under control soon..."

"Have your relatives escapes quickly. The Eastern Province will fall at the hands of the Kioka Army in less than a month."

Ikta blandly inserted words into the middle of the conversation. At that sinister detail, the group creased their eyebrows.

"...Wait. What do you mean by that?"

"What I said. The Eastern Stronghold will collapse and that whole area will be seized by the Kioka Republic. I pity Lieutenant General Rikan. If he didn't have a tight choker, this kind of result wouldn't be necessary."

"I can't let that go unchallenged, Ikta Solork. The Eastern Stronghold led by Lieutenant General Rikan is currently devoting its full energy to repelling the barbaric invasion. Since that's the case, why are you assuming defeat?"

"And belief in certain victory invites consequences. But defeatists like you probably won't understand."

That large group unanimously opposing Ikta were students decided on being involved with the military for their career after graduation. At their root was the blind faith to act in accordance with their own nation's army, changing its name to the abandonment of thinking called "belief in certain victory," and even producing a foolish optimism about the war situation in the Eastern Province.

"I heard a rumor that you're taking the High Grade Military Officer Exam, but- ha- are you sober? Before passing or not passing, consider whether the Imperial Army wants a coward like you, 'Ikta the Lazy.'"

"Nothing but skipping lectures and practical skills lessons. If we talk about what you do in that time, afternoon naps, idleness, and picking up women come to mind. A refined specimen of a good-for-nothing, master of deadbeat life-- that's you, don't you agree, Ikta Solork?"

"Look, he has no words to say back."

"Come on guys, don’t be that way. This is a day for celebration, so let’s enjoy it without fighting."

In the middle of everything, those words from Yatori elicited only restraint from everyone else. When they left with slightly dissatisfied expressions, the remaining Yatori sighed and began to ask the youth next to her a question.

"...So it’s true, it’s really collapsing? The Eastern Stronghold."

"Do you think that a boxer who could block a fist would have a chance at winning?"

Ikta’s example was simple and sharp. While pouring a refill of palm wine into his cup, he continued.

"If you think calmly, it’s something you understand quickly, isn’t it? The main point, why is the Eastern Stronghold trembling even now in the action zone? The 'Stronghold' is a standing local military organization during peacetime. Since over three months have passed since the Kioka Army’s invasion began, if we’re seriously planning to win the war, it’s strange that they weren’t able to send military forces from Central a long time ago and replace ‘’the Eastern Province District Army’’."

The Stronghold that was a standing organization, concerning the insufficient mobility of the military, had the power to protect but not the power to attack. "A boxer who could block a fist," which Ikta used as an example was like that. The troops without the ability to make an assertive attack for that reason were under the pressure of a defensive battle they couldn’t foresee.

"That one has no hope of winning with a non-aggressive defense is basics of the basics of military science. Because you’ll just be caught off guard and overehelmed. The current Eastern Stronghold is on the verge of that… no, is it worse? Because the New Division recently released by the Kioka Army into the war has slipped our guard and is causing damage."

"... You mean the Aerial Warfare Unit, right? Certainly, that’s a threat the Empire didn’t predict."

Yatori nodded unpleasantly. --The Aerial Warfare Unit. That was the Kioka Army’s New Division, organized to resemble countless soldiers riding blimps. They crossed the national border from the skies and invaded Imperial territory, visiting and dropping large quantities of flaming oil on towns and army facilities that had been turned into supply relay points.

As a result of the flying altitude being too high, there were currently no measures on the Empire’s side to directly counter Aerial Warfare. From a distant height that neither arrows nor bullets could reach, they could continue causing damage to the Empire. This accumulation of damage would cause the troops of the Eastern Stronghold to suffer over time.

"From the start of the 'air bombings' from Aerial Warfare until now, already how many towns have been burned...? No, if only houses are being burned, then that’s still fine. They burn field crops, burn granaries, and the towns can’t maintain a food supply. The Stronghold’s troops are

the same. Concerning food these days, they should already be in a state of distress."

"But the supplies from Central should have arrived."

"The amount to distribute to all of the people burned out of their homes by the air raids? There's no way Central has that kind of surplus. Hypothetically, even if they do send it, can they continue that endlessly from now? Even though they have no expectations of winning the main war?"

Saying that, Ikta slumped, lying down on the bench. As if, ridiculously, that was just about everything he to want to say.

"More than anything, I pity the Commander-in-Chief of the Stronghold, Hazaaf Rikan. The commanding of a lost battle would certainly be bitter, wouldn't it? This and that, everything was the negligence of the Emperor and Ministry who have no intention waging war seriously."

"Put an end to it there, Ikta. As I expected, this isn't the place for this."

Wary of eavesdroppers in the surroundings, Yatori warned against his speech. The Katjvarna Imperial Family was sacred, forbidden territory. To say nothing of the current wartime, casually speaking those criticisms wouldn't be tolerated. Particularly, it would invariably involve the contributions of a descendant of a Distinguished Family of the Classical Military Factions, Yatori, with the responsibility... One couldn't speak carelessly.

"First, rather than talking about a war we can't influence, there is currently a more constructive topic for us, right?"

"Hnn…? Ahh, this evening's Graduation Festival? I want to go all out the whole night. Where should I go to drink?"

"You just drunk to your heart's content! I meant the High Grade Military Officer Exam."

While holding Kusu face up in his arms, Ikta made a sour face as if he had swallowed a bug.

"Ah-- that depressing event was also left…"

"Even if you're indisposed, I'll have you participate... Really, you do understand it's significance right?"

Drawing closer in direction Ikta's head as he declined, Yatori whispered in a small voice inaudible to their surroundings.

"...Using the Igsem Family connections, I prepared a librarian position at the National Library of the Capital for you. In exchange, I'll have you take the High Grade Military Officer Exam together with me and fight in my favor during the Secondary Exam Continuation. You also agreed to the deal, right?"

"That's a given, since the Library of the Capital is the retirement destination for nobility.

Lending out various amusements to empty-headed people with riches and leisure time to spare, occasionally maintaining dust-covered, pitiable academic books… just for that, I'd have a sum as my salary so that I wouldn't need to worry about my next meal. For me, that's a distant dream. Although I did think that it was a cheap-shot scheme, uncharacteristic of you, Yatori. If it's you, success is ensured even without something like my help, no?"

"Say what you want. If all I had to do was succeed, then I'd fight with just one arm…. However, the results required of eldest daughter of the Igsem family aren't just that. The distinction of 'top success' is necessary."

"Haven't you done nothing but monopolize that distinction with everything from the time at the Academy? It's about time you surrendered it to someone, you know. You aren't the only person who wants to sit in the top seat."

"Look who's saying that. Just because you didn't sit in it doesn't mean I'm the only one who did."

Hearing that, Ikta stared blankly, possibly in a strange condition due to the heat, picked up Manila clamshells from the plates of food he finished eating, and one by one began placing them on his head. Yatori's eyebrows drew in doubtfully.

"...Wait, that, what are you doing?"

"Overestimating myself too much."[5]

Without making any kind of comment, Yatori knocked the Manila clams down from the youth's head.

"...As I was saying! You aren't the type to not use the ability that you're hiding without any meaning. Particularly for this test, it seems that the youngest of the Remeon family is going to appear as a strong candidate. There's no being too careful. Treading on you, Yatorishino Igsem will record her first step in military rule."

"Well, I think that's fine. By what I heard, the league of your fellow Secondary Exam Continuation test-takers doesn't seem unusual. Being the first to enter battle and preparing military forces are the basics of the basics of military affairs. 'The many outweigh the few.'"

"If you understand, then that's fine. Sincerely try not to make a mistake large enough to fail the Primary Written Examination."

"Yep, I got it, I'll try my best. Because, unlike you, being involved with the army is the last thing I want to do."

While responding shamelessly, Ikta skillfully poured a refill of palm wine into cup while lying down.

The High Grade Military Officer Exam—an obstacle which only those who have completed the Childhood Military Discipline Course at a designated educational institution as study material were allowed to challenge, so to speak the first trial that upper echelon cadets needed to surmount to

become elite soldiers.

With the case in the army where one Private First Class = two Privates, one couldn’t climb the ranks unless with very large military gains in actual combat, and that promotion reached its limit with the seventh rank from the bottom, the non-commissioned officer "Sergeant Major." But the High Grade Military Officer Exam was something created with the goal of selecting candidates for commissioned officers, and those who passed it were able to acquire the status of "Warrant Officer," one rank above "Sergeant Major," from the beginning. However, the Exam could be taken once per year, up to three times.

Of course, the passing rate was absurdly high. Spanning the entire test, they seldom, if ever, cut by 400 times, and they didn’t reduce by 20 times even with just the Primary Written Examination. But since there was a tendency for the people of the Katjvarna Empire to regard soldiers as heroes, the ones who succeeded at this became objects of adoration. It was a chance to acquire both status and prestige….

"Nnn--, national tactics discourse. How bothersome--"

The existence of Ikta drowsily moving a pencil in the middle of test-takers who were facing and squinting their eyes at exam papers was already shockingly out of place. And yet the answering itself was advancing unusually smoothly from the start that the surrounding test-takers alike only felt ashamed.

"Ahh-- the Study of Military Affairs Administration. How tepid--"

Concerning his posture, it was the same as that of a child forced to do summer homework. Cheek propped up, lips curving in an "ㅅ" shape, eyes somewhat like those of a dead fish. So, falling flat the instant he finished the answers for each subject class, and lying that way without fixing his eyes, he didn’t so much as twitch until the collection of exam papers.

"Geh-- Alderah Theology. How annoying--"

Depending on the personality of the instructor proctoring the Exam, that was a lack of seriousness quite capable of having him ordered from the room, but it appeared that he was blessed by enough luck to slip by.

And like that, the Exam’s second day arrived, the last subject of which was the "Use of the Military."

"This is the last one, this is the last one…. Hnn?"

Mechanically filling out exam papers, the hand of Ikta, who was practically in the state of a living corpse, abruptly stopped. The theme of the essay question written on the last of the exam papers seized his eye and didn’t let go.

--Freely state your thoughts concerning the Imperial Army’s former General Bada Sankrei, who

previously abandoned the Kioka War and was made into a war criminal.

"..."

For the first time since the Exam began, a question was posed that could leave him at a loss. Based on the style of answer, "freely state," it wasn't characteristic of the questions asked the army. There didn't seem to be an intention to fit a template.

--However, from the contents, he could sense just a slightly nostalgic scent.

Since Ikta, who without thinking instinctively didn't want to answer, couldn't really list criticisms of the Imperial Family on the High Grade Military Officer Exam, and since he had belief that he should already be working on matters in another subject, he recorded this short answer.

--Every hero dies of overwork.

At 7:20PM, the Primary Written Examination ended at every venue, and the over 6,000 test-takers were reduced to fewer than 300 as per every year.

About one month after the completion of that Primary Written Examination. Ikta and Yatori, carrying luggage for a journey on their backs, were gazing at the ocean from the harbor with their respective spirits. As a result of the Secondary Examination Continuation being conducted on the Hirgano Archipelago on the southern side of the Empire, they came to board the transport ship heading to the actual location.

"Things are going just as planned so far, aren't they? I'm relieved that you passed."

"It's because I'd been skipping lectures and doing nothing but exam study ever since the deal was proposed two years ago."

Ikta answered mixed with a yawn. Unlike the High Grade Military Officer Exam which one can pass with just excellent grades, a librarian position at the National Library of the Capital was exclusive to retiring nobility. Ikta had no chance outside this deal.

"Not that I'm discriminating against library employees, but you're really working hard for that. It's not even that you're particularly a bookworm, right?

"I like books, but if I had to say, any work would be fine. The point is that it's a librarian at the 'National' Library 'of the Capital.' If just those parts were the same, then I wouldn't care even if I were a gardener or a cleaning lady."

The Katjvarna Empire's capital Banhataal was the Empire's core both geographically and politically. Hypothetically, even if the war situation with the Kioka Republic worsened after this, it would be the last of the last to be persecuted. The welfare program was also generous for employees of a national institution like the Library. To be blunt, it was a position in which one could slack off until the nation

was on the brink of ruin.

"Once this deal goes smoothly, if I can idle away like that until I die. Two years worth of exam study is cheap, you know? Since I hate wasting effort, I'm not stingy with that amount: the effort needed for myself to slack off."

"Haa…. I see. So you're that kind of person."

Sighing with half disgust and half admiration, Yatori gazed at the great ocean spreading out before her eyes. On the ocean surface, the waves were low and the winds calm. It was hatefully clear weather. The beach air smelled like a mix of sand and salt.

"The ship is here, Ikta. Come now, Yatori and Shia should go, too."

Urged on by the light spirit Kusu stored in the pouch on Ikta's hip, the two lined up and went walking in the ship's direction.

From the medium-sized ship coming along the harbor, sailors recognizable as soldiers with one glance got off and scrutinizingly appraised Ikta and Yatori's full lengths.

"Your exam admission tickets."

After confirming exam admissions tickets from both of them, the sailors silently prompted to the two to board. When they boarded, there were no frivolous ornaments, characteristically of army furnishings, but it was a generally attentively maintained, sanitary ship. The guest cabins to which they were guided, despite being narrow, still had beds stacked three levels high on the left and right--furthermore, an earlier guest was there.

"...Ahh, good afternoon. Perhaps, are you also test-takers?"

The one who spoke with an expression that mixed nervousness and relief, was a tall girl with pale blue hair. Her partner, a water spirit, was sitting on her lap. It was a gentle impression in contrast with the firm Yatori.

"It seems so. I'm Yatorishino Igsem. A 131st Term graduate of the Imperial Segal Grand Academy. My partner is the fire spirit Shia. This is Ikta Solork from the same year and the light spirit Kusu…. You are?"

Slightly surprised by the family name Igsem which Yatori mentioned, she immediately returned a self-introduction.

"I-I'm extremely grateful. Umm, I'm an 11th Term graduate of the Imperial Min Mihaela Nursing Academy, Haroma Bekkel. This little one is my partner, the water spirit Miru. Igsem-san, Solork-san, please be kind to me."

Sitting on the bed opposite Haroma, Yatori added words in a gentle tone.

"We didn't settle on using our family names. Yatori is fine, you know."

"Please, if you would, call me Ik-kun with affection."

Haroma gave a small laugh at Ikta's behavior as he teased her with a pompous tone.

"You can ignore this person's joke, Haroma-san. If you go along, you'll be sucked in by his manner."

"Hehe… you two get along well, don't you? Then, if you'd like, please call me Haro. Since my acquaintances all call me that."

"I'll impose on your words, Haro…. Your partner is a water spirit, and you yourself come from a Nursing Academy, so I wonder if your targeted Division is the Medics?"

"It's as you say. While I'm embarrassed about this, it's my third time as a test-taker, and this is the first time I passed the Written Examination. Since it's my last chance, it would be nice if they would let me survive, but…"

"The Medics Division, compared to others, does have a low success rate, but I think you have plenty of hope. If we end up competing, I can't go easy, but if there is a way to cooperate, I'd want to join hands."

With both a smiling tone and expression, Yatori's innermost thoughts were half honest opinion and half calculations. With preparing the "perfect ally with no interest in passing the Exam" called Ikta as her first military gain, she was now in the phase of acquiring allies locally.

"If we can, that's reassuring. The eldest daughter of the Igsem Family-- I've heard rumors of Yatori-san's fame."

"Oh, I'm flattered. It would be nice if the actual strength accompanying me was even half of that in the rumors, though…"

When the two began their socializing mixed with modesties, the cabin door opened and a new passenger showed his form. He was a chubby youth with a round face placed on a plump torso. He quickly surveyed the inside of the room, and, startled at one point, widened his eyes.

"Ikta Solork…? W-Why are you here?!"

"Ohh, my buddy Matthew! You passed too? Why how great, how serendipitous!"

Embraced by Ikta who stood up from the bed, the youth called Matthew made an extremely reluctant face. While desperately pushing his companion away, his gaze this time was concentrated on Yatori.

"Tch, Yatorishino… so you're here too, huh?"

"It's been a month, hasn't it, Matthew-kun? I'm glad we were able to meet. It doesn't seem the

same way for you, though."

"Of course, not. If you had messed up on the Primary Examination, you don't know how thrilled I'd be."

Matthew cursed her loathingly. On behalf of Haroma whom he hadn't met, Yatori inserted an introduction.

"This is Matthew Tetdrich and his partner, the wind spirit Tsuu. He's in the same year as Ikta and I am. If Haro has a memory of hearing the family name Tetdrich, then please say so. I think he'd be very pleased."

"What kind of introduction is that?! Whether someone remembers us or not, within the Empire, the Tetdrich Family is still a preeminent Distinguished Family of the Classical Military Factions! It isn't superior or inferior to ones like Igsem or Remeon!"

"Te-Tetdrich… was it? Umm… If I've heard it before or haven't… It's not that I don't feel it's on the tip of my tongue, but…"

Since Haro unknowingly said something rude, Matthew stamped his feet and ground his teeth in frustration. With that timing, Ikta, as if comforting, or perhaps one should say, as if teasing, clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"It's fine, Matthew. It's that major-on-a-minor-scale type of popularity that's your position. It's not particularly necessary for all entertainers to have a national fan-base. You're honestly trying your best on the local route."

"Just who is an entertainer?! Ahh, come on, whatever is fine, so for the time being, you can let go!"

Followed by Ikta like a ghost in the background, Matthew hugged his knees in a corner of the cabin and sat down in protest. Shaking her head, Yatori restrained Haro, who was trying to say something as if unable to just watch.

"Stand up quietly. In those current circumstances, whatever you say, he'll take offense to it."

"H-hahh.... ...Somehow, are you used to the treatment?"

"He's someone I've continued entangled with for four years. Ah, but if Ikta is there, coping with it is easy. It's like using poison to overcome poison."[6]

Yatori finished talking with a light smile. When she did, the figure of Ikta talking incessantly to Matthew seemed even to Haro like a poisonous snake twined around its prey. Slightly scared, she averted her gaze.

"...Umm, Yatori-san, you're in the same year as Ikta-san, right?"

"Yeah. He's a friend from since we enrolled in the Grand Academy. Well, it's a strange coincidence, but you might say I got stuck with him."

As Yatori spoke mixed with a sarcastic laugh, Haro, bringing her mouth slightly closer to her ear, asked in an even smaller voice.

"Umm, Matthew-san also seems the same way, so, then as I expected, Ikta-san is also a descendant of a Distinguished--"

"Hahaha, no~o way. Solork is the name of an orphanage, young lady."

With laughter suddenly in her ear, Haro without thinking cried "Hyaa?!" and turned around. Ikta, who seemed to have come unnoticed from Matthew's side, had shamelessly encamped next to her and was laughing hysterically.

"A descendant of a Distinguished Family, you said? I have no father and no mother. At the time, I found Kusu when he was working at the Solork Orphanage, collapsed and dying in a decaying vacant basement. I've been with that little guy ever since. Also, luckily since I wasn't that stupid, I was allowed to attend the Grand Academy on a scholarship."

"Ah, so that's what happened. Excuse me, I asked something rude based on my interest... Kyaa?!"

"It's fine, I don't mind~ Since I'll also do considerably rude things to you from now on."

After having the back of her hand caressed, an erotic voice rose from Haro's mouth. While watching the spectacle, Yatori held her face with one hand as if to say, "so it's started again..."

"Tall, aren't you… slender. You're even five fingers taller than a boy like me..."

"Hya, I'm 176cm....[7] Excuse me, in spite of being a girl, I'm meaninglessly tall..."

"Doesn't it just mean you have good physical development...? ... Ah, your fingers are a little rough. Do you normally do housework by yourself?"

"I-I have five younger brothers, and I'm their older sister... Hyaa! Don't stroke my upper arm...!"

"The eldest daughter of six siblings? My goodness, that's incredible, no, stressful.... What do your parents do?"

"T-They're renting fields from the lord in the area.... But the earnings from just that aren't enough, if I don't get promoted and send money-- Yaa, don't pinch my earlobe, or comb through my hair...!"

The touching that began with the back of her hand, making that its origin, steadily advanced in the direction of her body. To be honest, Yatori thought that it was amusing, but since it'd reach a refinement unsuitable for pictures if it continued, before that happened, she decided to grab Ikta by the nape of his neck and stop him.

"We're stopping there, Ikta. Save picking up women for another time."

"Ohh, too bad."

After he was tossed away by Yatori, Ikta returned to the direction of Matthew who was hugging his knees in a corner of the room. Noticing Haro, who was happily freed but breathing very feebly, Yatori called out.

"Are you okay…? Sorry, I stopped him, but it was a little late."

"Hahh, hah… J-just what did he do to me...?"

"It's a bad habit of his. Even though he's not that handsome, for the time being he likes to seduce girls. Left alone with the same pace as now, your breasts would then be massaged, and you taken to bed. Then when you finally notice something, it'd be chirping in the morning."

"B-br…!? A-Awaah!?"

"Calm down, Haro. If you're near me, you're fine."

While gently hugging Haro's shoulders, Yatori, giving a sly smile, was exclaiming, "alright, I successfully won her over!" triumphantly in her mind. The Local-Acquisition-of-Allies Phase was commencing smoothly.

Suddenly, the cabin door slowly opened a second time.

The one who shyly showed his face was a handsome boy even taller than Haro. He had clear green eyes and hair tinged with a light green extending to his shoulders. In the pouch on his hip was the form of a wind spirit, the same as Matthew's Tsuu.

"Umm, is it okay if I come in? Or not, if you're in the middle of something."

"Of course you can't. Get back to your own territory, Ikemen[8]."

For some reason, Ikta immediately rejected him, but Yatori, sealing his mouth with one hand, welcomed the newcomer.

"Go ahead, come in. Well, everyone did self-introductions, so will you also join in?"

Readily accepting the invitation with a refreshing smile, the youth started his self-introduction as he entered the room.

"I'm Torway Remeon. I'm an 82nd Term graduate of the Imperial Ermi High Grade Academy. This little one is my partner, the wind spirit Safi. Somehow, please be kind to me, everyone. It's a difficult Exam, but let's try our best together until we succeed."

The moment the youth gave that name, the upper body of Matthew, who was crouching in a corner of

the room, rose energetically. At the same time, both of Yatori's eyes opened wide. From some sort of silent agitation, her lips hung loosely.

"...I see. So you're the Remeon's…"

The third son of the Distinguished Remeon Family of the Classical Military Factions, on equal standing with the Igsems in the Empire. The strongest contender for success in the current term's High Grade Military Officer Exam. Her biggest rival was in front of her eyes-- with that understanding, Yatori took several deep breaths and calmed her heart, then, with an authority as if exchanging declarations of war, gave her name.

"I'm Yatorishino Igsem. This little one is my partner Shia…. I don't need to talk about something like my personal history, right?"

"...Yatorishino!? Right, that fiery hair, the Igsem Family's…! Ahh, my goodness!"

Just hearing his companion's name, Torway brightened his eyes as if seeing an adored heroine. Even the mouth that until now functioned smoothly suddenly became clumsy, meaninglessly mumbling, "umm, that, uhh," repeatedly. Looking at that condition of his, Yatori drew in her eyebrows doubtfully.

"...Wait, what? If there's something you want to say, then say it clearly."

"I-I can't mentally prepare myself…. M-Miss Igsem, I--"

"You guys, are full of yourselves."

The moment Torway steeled himself and tried to say something, Matthew broke in between him and Yatori. Gallantly confronting the two, the plump eldest son of the Tetdrich Family roughened his voice.

"The Igsems' Close-Quarters Combat Tactic, naturally, and even the Remeons' Line-of-Battle Firearm Combat Tactic aren't cutting edge anymore. If you guys aren't the forerunners of the battlegrounds anymore, then you aren't the stars. I won't unconditionally let you guys have big egos[9] just because you're dependents of the Distinguished Families."

"Umm, you are…?"

"I'm Matthew Tetdrich. Don't forget this name, youngest of the Remeon Family."

Matthew gave his name with a menacing look that practically declared war, but hearing that, Torway, in contrast to his companion, gave a charming smile.

"Remembering people's names is my strong point. Let's try our best together and succeed, Matthew-kun."

"Hmph, Using false friendship to throw me off guard is useless, you know."

"Matthew-kun… Matthew-kun, huh…. …Hm~m, can I call you Maa-kun?"

"Haa!?"

Given a nickname without any context, Matthew widened his eyes. Meanwhile, Yatori, who was interrupted in a conversation with her rival, sighed and pushed his body aside.

"...It's natural that the Combat Tactics invented by our ancestors become old things as time passes. From the start, I had no intention in the least of hiding behind the glory of the past. In addition, if you let me say so, Matthew-"

Meaningfully leaving a beat, while intently watching her companion, Yatori finished speaking with a scornful laugh.

"Looking at things objectively, undeniably, in terms of size, your ego is the largest among us all[9]."

"W-wha!"

Precisely prodded at a physical characteristic which he was habitually self-conscious about, Matthew groaned with a miserable face. Charging in without bearing in mind the difference in rank would result in his defeat, that was a pattern evident from his time as a student.

"Kuraa~, don't bully Matthew."

Ikta forced his way in as if reading in monotone from a script. Torway shook his head with an embarrassed face.

"I didn't mean to bully him- if I ruined the mood, then I'm sorry. By the way, you..."

"Hmm, let there be silence. Two hunters[10] aren't needed on one hunting ground."

"E-eh?"

"Listen and be astonished, you have been handed down a guilty verdict in the face of judgement. The nature of the offense is precisely an attractive face and figure. According to the Scriptures of Alderah, death unto all ikemen!"[8]

"Your speech just now, that's the stuff of an Inquisition! And at the minimum, have a back and forth in your conversations!"

When Yatori interrupted as the straight man[11], Torway sent her a look that asked, "an acquaintance?" She sighed and gave Ikta's introduction.

"This guy is Ikta Solork. Like Matthew, he is in the same year as I am. Although he has a habit of threatening good-looking males for the time being, don't mind it too much. He just has a strong sense of territory."

"Ikemen should go explode! Grrr!"

Yatori explained grabbing the nape of the growling Ikta's neck.

"...Is there a good relationship? Between you two. "

"We just spend a lot of time together."

Yatori responded bluntly, but anyone's eyes could see affection from her back and forth with Ikta. Torway returned his gaze to Ikta a second time, and, with an expression vaguely mixed with envy, slowly extended his right hand.

"I'm Torway, please take care of me, Ikta-kun.… That is, I wonder if you'll be good friends with me?"

Stopping the threats, even Ikta intently watched his companion. Those pupils had the shrewdness to see into one's interior. Whether or not Toway's mild-mannered demeanor was a calculated thing-- he had temporarily inferred from the back and forth until now, and for those results, he reached the conclusion that this one was a good person of the natural airhead variety.

"...I'm Ikta Solork. Repeating in my imagination the state of your face smashed apart so that it lost its structure about ten times, I was able to reach a tolerant mood. I'll be friendly with you."

It was just a slip of his refreshingly honest opinion, but it was nevertheless a condescending attitude. But, luckily, since Torway was a youth who wasn't particular about minute details, a practically miraculous handshake was able to connect between the two.

"Mhmm, take care of me, Ikta-kun.… Ahh, that's right, can I call you Ik-kun?

"No, I refuse. What the hell are you talking about?"

Although Torway was naturally eager to use a nickname despite it being their first meeting, continuing from Matthew, Ikta was Ikta, and he naturally gotten rid of that mercifulness.

"Really, Ik-kun, was it? Don't be ridiculous, she is the only one who can call me that."

Black eyes filled with meaning turned to Haro's direction. He suddenly included a character that had been outside the mosquito net until now into the circle, and, in addition, even though she didn't ask him, he gave her introduction.

"She is Haroma Bekkel. She is aiming to be a commander in the Medics, and she has five younger brothers at home. She's a very good kid, you know. I guarantee it."

"I-Ikta-san!? The flow of that introduction, it might lead to a big misunderstanding…!"

Haro was flustered and trying to make amends, but, unfortunately, Ikta hadn't said anything wrong

content-wise until now. Unaware of the circumstances, Torway exhibited the merits of guessing in the wrong direction.

"I see, so that's how it is. Mhmm, you two, you really suit each other."

"'That's' how what is!? Noo, don't look at me with such warm eyes…!"

Ikta, having twisted facts into a convenient form and thoroughly delighting in those results, unexpectedly had his foundation shaken violently. With the ship starting its engine and leaving the harbor, Yatori settled the area for the time being

"Since self-introductions are roughly finished, everyone, let's settle down for now. Even if we are blessed by the wind, it's a long trip close to two days until the Hirgano Archipelago. Concerning what happens after we're dropped off on the other side, we should preserve our energy."

"Ahh, that's right. Then, shall we decide on each of our beds and collect our luggage?"

"Hey Haro, which position is good for you? Top? Bottom? Behind? Ahh, sitting face to face is good too, hehehe."

"Why are you only asking me!? Also, are we really talking about bed positions!?"

"...Ego… my ego… is it that big…?[9] ...mutter mutter…"

Then they each settled on their own beds, and weary from traveling until now, the five entered a light sleep. Incidentally, at the end of heated discussion, Ikta's bed was assigned the farthest diagonally from Haro.

With the rocking of the ship growing violent due to a sudden deterioration of the weather three hours after they left port, Ikta and the others, all of them in the same cabin, began to open their eyes in turn. The long trip by boat, still in its opening stages. From anyone's perspective, there was too much time remaining.

"U-ummm… 7--6 Bombing Troops… no, 3--3 Wind Gunning Troops."

"Are you finished with that? Well then, for me let's have 4--6 Air Gunning Troops with the merging of war forces and pieces from both sides."

Sitting on a bed face to face, Matthew and Torway were waging war in military shogi. Both the one who brought the pieces and board and the one who proposed the contest was Matthew, but the war situation appeared to be unfavorable to him.

"3, 4, 5--7 Wind Gunning Troops Battalion. ...Umm, with that, maybe four pawns are checkmated, right?"

"W-wait a minute! I still haven't…"

Matthew was growing desperate and gazing intently at the board, but when he looked, his own army was increasingly at a disadvantage with every glance. He understood that the the outcome was already decided with the first minute and then devoted three minutes to mental preparation, and finally, he squeezed out the few words, "...I died."

"Damn it, one more game! This one was just one foolish mistake after another!"

Even while saying that, the game record was already facing the reality of Matthew's third consecutive defeat, but, hating to lose, he couldn't readily acknowledge the difference in their ability. Torway, sensing that only an unproductive struggle would continue at this rate, felt worried about his companion and made a proposal.

"Hey Maa-kun, is it okay if we give our impressions of the match? The game just now, there's a part I want to reflect on."

Since Matthew also accepted based on reason that progress didn't exist without calm reflection on defeat, he, though reluctantly, consented to Torway's proposal. Seeing that they had pretty much come to a stand still, it seemed there was no room to lodge a complaint about the overly familiar way of address, "Maa-kun."

"Uhh, even though I simulated until the mid-game.... Which was the deciding turn? Was it when I sent out too many Bombing Troops at the sixth turn, or when I lost the Medics at the 12th turn...?"

When Torway, taking care not to injure his companion's pride, tried to state his opinion, a third person's voice, even though it wasn't even called for, came down from overhead.

"--It was the 21st turn, my buddy Matthew. It was when you let your Air Gunning Troops, whose merging of war forces was obstructed, uselessly be taken by the enemy line. There, you should have graciously retreated, and shifted to protect."

Clicking his tongue at Ikta's seemingly taunting voice, Matthew aligned the pieces with a loathsome expression. Torway widened his eyes and looked at the topmost bunk.

"Ik-kun, you remembered the course of the game? I wondered if you couldn't see the board well from there."

"I said not to call me Ik-kun, Ikemen. Next time, I'm hitting you with a pillow."

His reply was blunt, but Torway honestly valued Ikta highly. That he remembered the course of the game was a considerable thing, but, it was the fact that he also grasped the offenses and defenses that deserved praise. The state of the game which Ikta considered to have separated victory from defeat was exactly the same part Torway was about to mention.

"Everyone, I made tea~"

Luckily with that, Haro came back into the room together with Yatori carrying a large earthenware teapot and cups for the number of people. She first tried to pour it using the table that was installed, but due to the swaying of the foundation, the earthenware teapot seemed nearly about to fall, they switched over to the method of pouring while holding the cups one by one in their hands.

"It's swaying considerably, isn't it...? When we borrowed the galley, we were able to see the condition of the ocean surface a little, but the waves are definitely amazing."

"Facing the strong effect of the west wind, it seems the course is deviating quite a lot to the east. Since we might be delayed with correcting the course, the boat trip seems like it will drag on longer than we thought. Really, a boat is a vehicle we have no control over."

While taking a cup of tea from Haro, Yatori unsympathetically tied up her hair. Her gaze was casually turned to the military shogi board that Matthew and Torway held between them.

"What's this, were you playing shogi? The result, how many consecutive defeats for Matthew?"

"W-why does the question take my consecutive defeats for granted...?"

"The lack of vigor in your objection means that that's exactly what happened, doesn't it? ...Well, I don't think it's possible to care that much, though. It's not like a shogi king equals a great commander anyway."

Torway found and developed the beginning of a new topic in Yatori's words, who had tried to sooth him just in case.

"Now that you mention it, regarding the interview in the final stage of this Exam, it seems you play a game of shogi with actively serving High Grade Military Officers. If one didn't apply their ability in shogi against the ability of a commander like that, then what kind of meaning does this arrangement have- don't you agree?"

"Since it's an interview while playing a game, I think it's something that can measure your ability to multitask[12]. Even if you become a High Grade Military Officer, if you can't manage two or three tasks at the same time, you'll become useless due to going over-capacity."

Yatori's answer was grounded in logic. Continuing, she looked at the figure of Ikta extending just his arm from the bed and accepting a cup of tea. While amazed at his laziness, she passed over the question from Torway.

"Ikta, what do you think?"

"..Nnn, it's rather delicious. However, rather than tea leaves steeped with milk, I prefer separately warmed milk added to a somewhat strong tea brewed with boiling water- I wonder if that way of brewing is preferable."

"Who asked for your opinion about the flavor of tea? Incidentally, the one who recommended boiling the milk was me, you know. If by any chance it's spoiled, it's not that I can't say it's my

fault."

For just having spent a lot of time together, Yatori was unusually smooth in dealing even with her friend’s ridiculous banter. While raising just his upper body and sipping tea on the bed, Ikta carefreely answered the original question.

"I think that Yatori’s reasoning was roughly accurate. Even excluding that point, it’s because this, in its own way, is full of the basics of art of war. It’s not bad as mental exercise. However, if I’m allowed to state my opinion-- if soldiers play anyway, blindfolded shogi that doesn’t use a board is better."

"--Huhh? Ik-kun, why-- Wapu!"

The falling pillow landed a direct hit on Torway’s face. Suddenly sticking his head out from the bed, Ikta yelled.

"Ik-kun forbidden! ...If you apply shogi to war, namely, the board equals the battleground. I ask a question with that, though, when you’re waging a war in reality, the commander look down on the entire battlefield from above the sky with the God’s point of view?"

"...That’s impossible. Regarding the locations of enemy forces, that’s restricted information, so that’s just about a situation where you can only make guesses. Concerning the allies under command, they aren’t restricted to moving as planned."

"That’s it. In real war, fighting starts when you grasp the positions of your allies and enemies. Necessary for that is the imaging ability to derive a whole image from fragmentary information. I won’t say that blindfolded shogi can train that, but it can create a foundation for the power of imagination. First you hold the 'board' in your mind. Starting with that, imagine the soldiers moving on the board... Ah, is there more tea?"

While smoothly stating his point of view, Ikta was having his tea poured for him by Haro in a precarious position with his arm extended from the bed, as often was the case. Torway and Haro were listening admiringly on one side, and Matthew was largely ignoring him and scowling at the board, but with that, the ship swayed on a grand scale.

"Ah." "Ahhh--!?"

The tea that spilled from Ikta's cup landed a direct hit on Matthew's head with a devilish angle. While lightly apologizing with a "sorry, sorry," to his companion, who ended up turning a somersault from the heat, he suddenly shifted his gaze to the cabin door.

"There, who is that?"

Yatori called out looking in the same direction as Ikta.

She was distracted by Matthew's scream, but at the moment the boat swayed, the sound of something colliding with the door resounded. Yatori, thinking it was suspicious, walked over and opened the

front door of the room.

"U-uhh...oww..."

She caught a petite young girl wearing a large hat on the opposite side of the open door. She couldn't see the face hidden by the wide brim, but the blond hair that flowed out, not fitting inside the hat, was smooth and beautiful. Her garments were also plain, but it was obvious that the fabric was superior, and they were worn somewhat elegantly.

"A test-taker... it doesn't seem that that's the case. Where are you from, young lady? Do you need something from us?"

When Yatori smiled gently and asked her question, the young girl seemed at a loss for a reply and mumbled, "e-excuse me," as a way to dodge and quickly leave down the hallway. Watching her leave, Yatori tilted her head.

"I wonder was that was? Well, at the very least, considering that an ordinary passenger just happened to be on a ship that's boarding High Grade Military Officer cadets... Ikta, what do you think?"

"Nnn... Five~six years remain until she is suitable for consumption. Until she is perfectly ripened, perhaps it's 15 years..."

"No one asked for the lower limit of your strike zone--"

The sudden assault of a severe vibration in the hull interrupted Yatori's retort. Everyone simultaneously lost balance, and the contents of the cups they held in their hands spilled completely. Clearly differentiated from the swaying until now, that was the impact of a serious collision, not something caused by the waves.

"--What's that!?"

While being the fastest of all of them in the same room to regain her balance, Yatori took an analysis of the situation. On the other hand, Torway was holding and propping up the shoulder of Haro, who fell face up, and Ikta, having fallen from the topmost bunk, crushed the elastically abundant body of Matthew and was shamelessly unharmed.

"O, Matthew, don’t tell me you saved me by bravely volunteering your body… Let us toast to our friendship."

"Ughh… someone like you should’ve fallen headfirst…"

About when Matthew pushed Ikta aside and finally rose, the spirits that were sitting quietly on the beds also sensed a state of emergency and came alive, settling into their respective masters’ pouches. When everyone confirmed each other’s lack of injuries, a sailor’s yell resounded from the open door.

"P-passengers, keep calm and listen! The bilge of this ship struck a reef and has started flooding.

Just now, an order for a complete abandonment of ship has been handed down from the ship's captain! Those who can move, immediately go to the deck, and following the sailor's instructions, and board the lifeboats!"

The voice instructing evacuation was shrill from the sense of impending crisis. Running aground, flooding, complete abandonment of ship-- from these words, everyone in that situation simultaneously imagined a single, fatefully derived end, together with an image of hopelessness.

"Everyone, you heard that! We're going to the deck!"

However, there was one person who brushed aside the pessimistic premonition in an instant and started moving. That was Yatori Igsem.

"There's no need to rush, form one line behind me and follow! Luggage to a minimum!"

The one who could take control of the area without wavering in this situation was a human called Yatori. She had the leadership to establish order immediately in a group that was reduced to a disorderly crowd facing a state of emergency.

And, everyone besides her as well were not resigned to the disorderly crowd in this setting.

A baptism of torrential rain and furious wind welcomed them, as they ran up the stairs with Yatori as their leader and emerged onto the deck. The mast, whose thickness exceeded that of an adult's waist, made creaking sounds with the wind pressure, and on top of that the sailors were working, risking their lives, to bring down the sails that were filled with wind and flapping wildly. Already the hull had sunk 20 times lower than normal, and, in addition, the time was early evening. The ocean surface, having just descended into darkness, was pitch black the whole time they were working.

"Stormy weather, is it…? A curse of bad weather in this situation, we're people hated by God."

"I wonder whose behavior was to blame. People with an idea try raising your hand."

"Without even thinking you're the only possibility, right? From now on let's abstain from jokes with the Scriptures[13] as material."

While striking a carefree banter with Ikta, Yatori, as the leader of the group, turned to the rear of the deck. There, four lifeboats had been readied, and the preparations were in order for one boat to launch from the sailors' hand to the ocean surface. Instructions flew from the sailors to Yatori's group who had come around.

"Help board from the people who came! You, the citizens, are maximum priority!"

Yatori, making a slightly surprised expression at undertone of 'the citizens,' quickly shook off the sentiment and resumed action. She had Haro board first, then Matthew, Torway, Ikta's turn, then finally she herself entered the boat. When everyone's bodies were settled into the boat, the sailors watching Ikta's figure apologetically added something.

"Your partner is a light spirit, isn't he? Listen up, because we ran aground, some injuries came up among the sailors, and right now we still can't let sailors board this boat. Since the lifeboats are all moored to the mothership, they won't drift away, but when it comes to it, the ropes need to be cut to send off your companions. At that time, please transmit your location to nearby boats with a light signal. Even when you're more or less drifted off, gather together with no exceptions!"

After seeing Ikta and Kusu nod in unison, the sailor let out the mooring ropes and lowered the boat containing them onto the ocean surface. The small boat abandoned to the great stormy ocean, rocking violently left and right, didn't allow the people it held to have the sensation that they were living.

"Th-this isn't a joke you know! With an ocean this rough, to find shelter in any boat...!"

"Maa-kun, lean to the right a little more! Bekkel-san to the left! We're making the balance of body weight uniform in the whole of the boat! With these waves, if we capsize once then we won't be able to recover anymore!"

The next to reach composure after Yatori, Torway sent out instructions, and Matthew and Haro, lost in shock, obeyed them. On the other hand, Ikta, in the middle of a pounding downpour, was motionlessly concentrating his eyes on the fatally sinking mothership.

"What's the matter, Ikta? Strike your usual needless comments. When you're quiet, there's a bad energy."

"I didn't know you took my behavior as an omen. ...More importantly, Yatori, it's that girl."

When Yatori, hearing that, followed Ikta's line of sight, caught sight of the young girl they came across in front of their cabin a while ago. The girl was on the deck, trying to board a lifeboat. The trembling of her thin shoulders was perceptible even at a distance.

It didn't seem the girl was at any age to travel alone, but she couldn't see the figure of another companion.

"...Ah!?"

That moment, a tragedy occurred. The hull tilted violently, receiving a wide blow from the waves on its flank, and, with the momentum, the young girl that was standing on the edge of the deck was thrown toward the ocean. Airborne for an instant-- without the time even to shriek, her small body was swallowed by the black ocean and disappeared.

One of the sailors who barely managed to stay on the deck, with a float tube in one hand, dispatched bloodshot eyes to the ocean surface.… But, too late. Even if he tried to send help, her form had been concealed in the valleys of the waves a long time ago.

"Mm, bad luck. That one's going to die."

Murmuring a reality exceedingly close to past tense, Ikta immediately stood up and began taking off

his outer garments.

"Kusu. If you see that girl again, shine on her with a high beam[14] for me."

"Ikta, that's dangerous. You should stop…"

"I'm trusting you."

Accepting his master's petition, Kusu reluctantly slipped out of the hip pouch as they discussed and, standing on the pouch's edge, fired a strong light from his abdomen's 'light cavity,' beginning to illuminate one section of the ocean surface.

Continuing, Ikta grabbed a lifesaving float tube which was scattered around the bilge, and entrusted to Yatori the free end of the rope knotted to it.

"If you let go easily, I'll come back for you as a ghost."

"Wai- you--!?"

Without affording Yatori time to think, Ikta dove headfirst into the ocean. Undaunted by the raging waves and treading the water with his limbs, he advanced directly to the location shown by the high beam. There was nothing for everyone left on the boat to do but hold their breaths and watch his back attentively as he nearly slipped into the middle of the pitch black ocean.

"...Bwahh!"

After ten-odd seconds, which felt like an eternity to the observers, Ikta rose to the surface, hugging the body of the young girl, which was as limp as a corpse. Yatori and the others breathed a great sigh of relief.

"It's impossible, I'm dying! Save mee!"

Answering the shriek that slipped out in that time, the four simultaneously began to pull the rope. While sustaining balance in the middle of rocking capable of toppling them even now, only drawing two people up to the boat was difficult.

"Hahh, hahh… Ahh that was close… Seawater's freakin' salty…"

"Stop complaining, if you're going to do something cool, then show off until the end…. Haro, how's this girl's condition?"

"She hasn't drunk any seawater, and her breathing and pulse are normal. It seems she's still in a state of shock, but…"

Laying her head down on Haro's lap, the young girl was silent. At the moment, it seemed that her slightly opened eyes would recover the light of reason soon, but simply escaping without confronting things as they were, that might have been a fortunate thing.

"It appears that there she doesn’t have bruises or lacerations. ...Hmm? This…"

In order to check for presence of injuries, Yatori, dividing the work with Haro and examining the girl’s body, had her attention captured by a ring fitted onto the the girl’s middle finger. It was a superior piece that also functioned as a seal, but rather than a mere expensive feel, the design plated in gold onto the silver base was too familiar.

"It’s no use, this one won’t hold anymore! I’m cutting the rope!"

That yell caused Yatori’s thinking to freeze. With the wave received in the flank seeming to have been a finishing blow, the mothership’s sinking already reached the recovery-impossible range. In accordance with their duty, the remaining sailors on top of the descending boat, executed the severance of the towing rope, which would become the job to last them a lifetime. The boat containing Ikta and the others had its connection to the mothership severed, and began to genuinely drift away.

"...Don’t tell me…. We were the only ones who were able to escape?"

Now, while tightly biting her lip and gazing at the form of the mothership, which was only waiting to be completely submersed, even Yatori, being who she was, had a haggard expression. In the background, Matthew was flailing his limbs and raising a piercing cry.

"Wh-what’re we gonna do? Thrown right in the middle of a stormy sea in a small boat, we’re going to die like this! "

Torway bound the panicking Matthew’s arms behind his back and held him down. On the other side, tightly hugging the body of the unconsciousness girl, Haro protested weakly with a whimper.

"W-we’re going to die, aren’t we? I-is there still anything--"

"...We’ll do what we can[15]. For now, we survive the storm."

Yatori said it in a firm voice as if giving everyone instructions, herself included.

In agreement with that, Ikta, despite sniffling, took over her words.

"Ah-choo! ...As Yatori said, from this point forward is the domain of chance. There’s nothing we can do until the storm is over. Slack off as much as possible, and after, let’s put God to work."

All Quiet on the Eastern Front



It felt like she was being swallowed by cold, black, bottomless darkness.

There was no way to resist it. Being tossed about by the raging current with no sense of up or down, her eardrums screeching and shrieking with the pressure of the water- but more than that, the pressure of despair crushed her heart. Staring down the terror of death before your eyes for the first time since birth is not something you could possibly face with the power of reason.

The strength of her floundering arms and legs quickly exhausted. --As that happened, a light shone.

She could vaguely see that something was coming, traveling along a straight path[16] that pierced through the darkness. At first, her arm was grasped- from there, her body embraced. She could hear the sound of a heart extremely close by. She could only think that it seemed the two of their pulses, passing through their touching skin, were synchronizing.

Inside her fading consciousness, she could tell that Death was clicking his tongue and growing distant from her as she was wrapped in light and warmth--

"...Nnn…"

Crackle, crackle--with the sound of sparks popping, the young girl opened her eyes.

Her view was dark. With a small open fire as the sole light source, in the center of the orange light, human silhouettes emerged. A handsome young man anxiously gazing at the fire together with a plump youth whose teeth were chattering. As she turned even more, there was an imposing female with hair the same color as flames sitting on the left end. She was closely hugging her partner, a spirit, whom everyone was sharing to warm themselves.

"...Ah! Were you woken up?"

With a gentle voice close to her ear, she gradually noticed that she was being held upright. There was a feeling of soft breasts on her back, and warmth was being distributed from the skin in contact with hers across thin undergarments.

"...You, are…?"

At her voice, before anything the red-haired female--Yatori rose and immediately knelt reverently.

"You were able to awaken, Your Highness, the Princess. ...Please allow me nothing but the privilege worshiping you like this."

Except Haro, who was embracing the young girl, the others followed Yatori's example and lowered their heads. Being shown respect from them, the young girl as well remembered, once more, her own rightful position.

"...You, raise your heads. You may eliminate etiquette- Under what circumstances..."

"Ah, as you wish. ...If I may explain concisely, during a boat trip headed to the venue for the High

Grade Military Officer Exam, the Hirgano Archipelago, the boat which we happened to ride together encountered a storm and sunk. The only ones to narrowly escaped on lifeboat, were the six of us, including Your Highness. More importantly, after approximately two days of drifting, we drifted ashore a beach somewhere…thus, we are now living in an underground cave."

Receiving Yatori's report, the young girl widened her large eyes and sank into silence...after that, she took a full several minutes and organized her memories, making up for the gaps with the information she heard a moment ago.

"...I see, the ship… So that really wasn't a dream?"

The unpleasant memory of being swallowed up by the pitch black ocean surface was brought back, and her shoulders suddenly trembled. Inside the layered outer garments she wore, Haro, embracing her small body, anxiously looked at her face from the side.

"During the two days of drifting, since the body of Your Highness, continuously struck by rain, became completely cold…this Haroma Bekkel and I, Yatorishino Igsem, had the honor of warming your body with our body warmth in turn. We were aware of our impoliteness, but for the lack of other methods, kindly pardon this much..."

"K-kindly pardon…!"

When Haro ashamedly lowered her head, the girl expressed a wry smile and shook her head.

"I am grateful from my heart for your kindness. With this one fragile body, I don't doubt that I might have died of the cold before waking. ...Incidentally, you. You just called yourself Yatorishino Igsem."

"Ah..."

"It's been a long time. I visited your home on the occasion of the Imperial visit of the reigning emperor, is that already a story from eight years ago?"

At the few words the girl spoke aimlessly, Yatori lifted her bowed head without thinking.

"...You remember it? At that time, Your Highness had just become four years of age…"

"Counting traditionally[17], you were 10 years old. You noticed me feeling irritated that my hand couldn't reach a plate, and you took baked sweets from the table for me. Did you also similarly recognize my appearance?"

All the same, the girl herself knew that it might be an unjustifiable story. Yatori smiled vaguely and answered.

"Compared to that time, Your Highness has exceeded my imagination and grown splendidly, so… Your golden-colored hair and the Katjvanmaninik[18] engraved ring, if I had been negligent in some respect to even one of them, I wouldn't have been able to be certain."

That said, the girl pulled her left hand from an opening in the outer garments she wore layered together with Haro. What she fitted onto it was a ring plated with a design of the Eternal Spirit Tree, which served as the symbol of the Katjvarna Empire.

"...Indeed. This person is the third Imperial Princess of the present Katjvarna Empire, Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik."

Except Yatori, who was half-convinced, the others appeared to realize that the existence in front of their eyes was nobility with a self-introduction from the mouth of the person herself. After a dignified silence, the one first of all to start the conversation was Torway.

"...I'm Torway Remeon. I meet you for the first time, Your Highness, Princess Chamille."

"Umm, you're the youngest of the Remeons. I've also heard rumors of you."

"It is an honor. If it pleases you, if you would allow me just one inquiry…"

Without waiting for the end of Torway's proposal, Her Highness, the Princess, began to answer in a firm tone.

"If it's the reason that I happened to board the same ship as you did, I'll answer without needing to be asked. In light of the worsening of the state of war with Kioka, as an extension of Imperial Family, I came to see the faces of the young people burdened with the future of this nation. It is also encouragement to the test-takers. It is nothing more or less than that."

"But, any accompanying military officers or...?"

"Don't finish your question. It's obvious that they sunk to the bottom of the ocean together with the boat."

Somehow, there was an obstinance in the tone of Her Highness, Chamille- who'd anticipated and answered the question- that didn't allow him to challenge her. ...But if there had been escorts, it was troubling that they didn't see anyone near her both when they met on board and when she came onto the deck. Torway kept that doubt inside his chest for the moment.

"I-I'm called, Matthew Tetdrich. Your Highness, the Princess, a-also allow me, a few words, if…"

Though his well fleshed-out body, clung to tightly by a wet shirt, was trembling, Matthew timidly cut into conversation. The gaze of Her Highness, the Princess, turned to him.

"Tetdrich… That is a pedigree entrusted with the Stationing Unit of Ebdorch Island in the Southwestern part of the Empire. I learned your name as well. If there is something you'd like to ask, then do as you like, Matthew Tetdrich."

Yatori, who was next to her, admired Her Highness, the Princess, who had fluently stated a summary of the Tetdrich Family, for her extensive knowledge. On the other side, starting to make his way over, Matthew himself, seemingly without the time to even notice that he'd met someone who knew his

family name, faintly choked out a plea from his discolored, purple lips.

“I-if your body is s-sufficiently warmed, if you, would n-now r-r-return the outermost layer, you’re wearing, m-my coat…”

Hearing that, Her Highness, the Princess, then noticed for the first time that the outer garments of everyone in that area were lent for the purpose of warming herself. As one would expect, Haro, thinking that it was inexcusable, panickedly restrained the girl trying to slip out from inside the layered garments which substituted for blankets.

“Kya- y-you shouldn’t come out! Both the Princess and I are only in our underwear, you see!? Yatori-san, please return Matthew’s clothing to him!”

Nodding, Yatori retrieved the just the outermost mantle and returned it, well-dried, to its owner. Merely taking advantage of that, Matthew, wrapped in the middle of superior fabric and seeming to devote all his effort into not losing body heat, didn’t say anything since.

“Ah, the Princess’s clothing is also mostly dried… Then, I think that it’s a little difficult to do, but could we have you change clothing like this?”

“If it is your wish, then we don’t mind dismissing the males. Well, but there is a storm outside.”

At the image of Yatori speaking cruel things with a smile, Matthew’s body trembled violently for a reason other than the cold. Her Highness, the Princess, refused her proposition- which wasn't good material for a joke- dismounted from Haro’s lap while wearing too much clothing with an unexpected promptness, and stood on the ground with her own legs for the first time in two days.

“Umm… I don’t feel unwell. I wonder if it’s because you warmed me.”

“That is above all, but now for a while, please be located near the fire. Under these conditions, if a cold or the like is caught by Your Highness, there’s nothing that can be done, even by us.”

Her Highness, the Princess, obediently complied with Yatori, who requested politely, but in a firm tone. Since sitting on the bare ground meant that her lower back would grow cold, she sat back down Haro’s lap in the end.

They surrounded the open fire in silence for a while, but Her Highness, the Princess, suddenly opened her mouth with a face as if she had been struck by lightning.

“...That’s right. I wonder if, the time the ship sunk, the person who rescued me when I was thrown out to the ocean is among us? There’s no mistaking that you all are the benefactors of my life, but I particularly want to express my thanks to that person. Come forward.”

“.... Please wait a moment.”

Rising, Yatori slipped out of their circle around the open fire and walked into the pitch dark depths of the cave. As a replacement for her disappearing figure, the sound of a limp, heavy object being kicked

echoed across accompanied by a scream.

“Wake up, Ikta. It’s a call from Her Highness, the Princess.”

“...Have her reschedule. For me to meet with a party without an appointment... oof.”

The same sound and a yell echoed back three times. As for whether the ordeal was finally over, a youth with a hand affixed to his hip like an old man worrying over lower back pain, naked above the waist and wearing a light spirit in a pouch, revealed his form.

“...I’m Ikta Solork. Thanks, Your Highness, the Princess- in a good mood?”

“How- so there was another person? Then, you’re the one…?”

“Well, it was the spur of the moment, or should I say, I was the right person at the right time…. Since I was the only light spirit holder…”

Dressing up formally with a shirt handed to him by Haro, Ikta, in a dreadfully inappropriate gesture, bowed to Her Highness, Chamille. Although in actuality, that was just him being kicked from behind by Yatori.

“I see. In any case, I give my thanks, Ikta Solork. In addition, to your partner, light spirit-dono as well. After I’ve safely returned to the capital, I’ll arrange for due compensation regarding your brave deeds.”

Kusu raised his head from inside the pouch. However, Ikta was sitting cross-legged at the moment.

“Then, it’s best if you can return safely, isn’t it...somehow…”

“Ikta. Stop speaking in a way that meaninglessly agitates anxiety.”

Yatori advised in a low voice. However, it was after their companion’s anxiety was already agitated.

“...It’s possible that return can’t be realized, you mean?”

“For us- who don’t know where this place is- quite so. It was fortunate that we were able to drift ashore while still alive, but even so we were carried away for a full two days in the middle of a storm. ...although on the way, I saw the sun come out in the upper right front side of boat’s course, so I just know that we were carried to the northeast.”

Ikta’s tone was trivial, but there was no aspect in contents that was glossed over with optimism. When Her Highness, the Princess, sunk into silence, Torway stood up to change the atmosphere, which had become considerably heavier.

“It seems the sound of rain has grown weaker. We also need to confirm the present location, and if that means going to observe outside, then perhaps we should go now. --Ik-kun, if you like, shall we go together?”

"That nickname, you really don't learn…"

Even while grumbling, Ikta stood up with surprising obedience. With each of their spirits stored in their hip pouches- after Torway took up his own bag in addition to that- the two lined up and left the cave.

The time appeared to be early morning since the sky was already bright, and the pounding storm had weakened to the degree of a light drizzle. Brushing aside thickets, Ikta and Torway pushed their way through a trail-less forested region that spread along the beach. During that, they had some slight conversation.

"Thank you for coming with me. To be honest, I wondered if Ik-kun wouldn't think this was too much trouble."

"Since Matthew was in that state of health, and the girls were needed for the Princess's protection, the lineup was decided by the process of elimination, right? I slack off when I need to slack off, but at times when if I slack off I'll die, I'll work."

It was a twisted argument, but Torway never disliked that character of Ikta's.

"So, about Her Highness, the Princess… Ik-kun, what do you think?"

"Even if there are suspicious points, I think that it's best not to make any strange investigations. At best, you'll get trapped in a bad situation."

"Aw, right to the core of things. When you talk with me, you won't return with humor?"

"I deliberately flip a switch. Even if I'm the funny man here, Yatori[19]isn't with me… ah, I found something good."

Ikta, finding a fruit-like object hanging from poison ivy, plucked it and threw it over to Torway. While biting into his own share, he explained.

"It's the insect trap of the pitcher plant. When it ripens and becomes used for attracting insects, it's not good anymore, but if it's before the mouth has opened, the fluid inside can be used for drinking. It's surprisingly sweet, so give it a try."

"...Ah, it really is. It's tart and delicious."

"Put some in your sack for me. It'll tide us over until we find real food."

Unable to put anything in their mouths outside the water created by Haro's water spirit, everyone in the cave was being tormented by hunger. Torway merrily took down the sack from his back, plucked the insect traps within reach, and began stuffing.

"But, you and Matthew both are people I look up to. Since, even when the ship we boarded sank, you

carried those heavy things out with such great care."

What Ikta meant was the iron, gun-like thing inside Torway's sack that conspicuously asserted its existence. The firing of leaden balls with the pressure from using a pump such as that installed onto the "wind tunnel" in abdomen of his partner, a wind spirit, was the main weapon of modern-day soldiers-- so to speak, it was an air shooter barrel.

"Haha. I considered it a little, but I thought that thinking about whether or not it'd be a burden and throwing it away could wait until after we boarded the lifeboat. Since, for me, an applicant to the Air Gunner Division, it's the most important thing next to the lives and partners[20] of my allies."

"Although it would be nice if we didn't run into circumstances where that'd serve a purpose. At any rate, ahh I'm hungry…"

Throwing away the insect traps that had their contents sipped dry, Ikta and Torway hurried ahead while listening to the chorus of the insects inside. While looking at a compass so they could move forward in a straight line and not lose their way, they emerged to a grassland that interrupted the forested region in about 15 minutes.

"...We're screwed."

As his field of vision suddenly cleared, Ikta surveyed the area and thus complained as the first thing out of his mouth. Coming a little later, Torway, upon witnessing the same sight as he did, was at a loss for words.

There was nothing surprising regarding the terrain. Extending considerably from east to west, an open field with a few undulations sprawled out uninterrupted. However, on the ground on the west side which they were supposed to follow back-- in addition to a natural mountain range and hills, ''something else'' stood as a further obstacle.

"...There's no way…. I mean, that's the west side…no matter how much we were carried off, this…!"

Even Torway, who had boasted a composure rivaling Yatori's until now, couldn't suppress the trembling of his voice this time. Displayed in his view were barbed wire entanglements running perpendicular to the shoreline that divided the open field in two, and within them, separated by fixed distances and dotting the area one by one, turrets meant for watch-keeping. From the closest one, he could even see the figures of actual soldiers coming in and out.

"...Somehow, it doesn't seem like a delusion. The ''eastern'' border of the Katjvarna Empire looks like it's on the ''western side'' from here. Meaning, basically…"

In any case, as to not be found by the guard soldiers, the two hid their bodies in the shadows of the trees. --First three clicks of his tongue. Then he huffed out a single sigh, generously blended with resignation until he was satisfied, and-

“This place is already territory of the Kioka Republic… it’s regrettable, but it looks like we’ve descended into hell but for a paper-thin difference.”

Ikta Solork described a reality similar to his own personal nightmare with quite a simple metaphor.

Due to the report spilled from the mouths of Ikta and Torway once they returned, the atmosphere of inside the cave, far from becoming lighter, instead welcomed an increase in pressure to one similar to lead.

“...That… to think we were carried off to the other side of the national border.”

Haro murmured with a paled face. Matthew, who just finally warmed his body, also let out a scream.

“Dammit…How can it be like this? Just when I thought we made it through…”

Regardless whether that was good or bad, Matthew’s words spoke for everyone’s true feelings. Even the great Yatori was silent as if there was a need to rethink her words of encouragement. Before that, Ikta acknowledged the circumstances.

“Because it turned out like this, the options that we can actively select are limited. So before anything, concerning that point, I think it’s wise for us all to establish a common goal.”

Without waiting for a response, Ikta raised his right and left index fingers and held them up so they could be seen by everyone.

“The first, surrender to the Kioka Army and request reception as prisoners of war. Well, if anything it’s relatively reliable.”

A heavy silence filled the cramped space. There was not one person among them attracted to that option.

“The second, cross the national border and return to the Empire with our own power. This one’s quite the gamble, no?”

Talk was cheap. When they considered the difficulties of putting it to action, no one could easily give their support.

After having a not-brief pause for consideration, appearing to be speaking timidly, Matthew opened his mouth.

“I-if we become prisoners of war, with the wartime treaty, our safety is guaranteed. Of course, we might be confined, but if we wait for a while, wouldn’t we be able to return to the Empire via a prisoner exchange...?”

Rather than a view grounded in reality, it was a wishful observation. Yatori shot it down completely.

“Still, that’s too optimistic, isn’t it? I think that even people without self-awareness are among us, but for the moment we are High Grade Military Officer cadets bearing the future of the Imperial Army, right? Just that is reason enough on Kioka's side to not want to send us back… even if you leave out that point- and this something including myself- among us, there are too many people who can serve as material for diplomatic exchange.”

“That’s true, isn’t it? Not even mentioning Her Highness the Princess, there’s Yatori-san, a descendent of the Igsem Family, and me, a descendant of the Remeon Family… under any circumstances, high prices would be set for us three as prisoners. Say for now that we are able to return, how much compensation will be required?”

“Goodness, people with high prices on their lives really suck, don't they? We can’t even secure our self-interests how we want to.”

Not one person had the composure to respond to the cynical remark which Ikta had uttered with a stunned expression.

“Well, that’s it in a nutshell, my buddy Matthew. Even if we become prisoners of war in this place, we won’t be returned that easily to our country[21], and say we were returned, then quite the cost would be wrung out for us. And you should imagine the narrowness of our shoulders among other things once we’ve return to our country. ...Well, in addition, the situation if we choose this option[22], we can only hope that the people of Kioka won’t find the Tetdrich Family’s fame as hot information, right?”

Even reaching this point, there was no escaping the harshness of the sarcasm from Ikta’s words. Matthew held his face and agonized, but, the next moment, a roar sounded across the cave as if to drive off those worries.

“Prisoners of war and the like-- this isn’t a joke!”

Her Highness, Princess Chamille, doing well to vigorously stand up, shouted with a look menacing enough to shake the flame of the open fire. Even as astonished gazes gathered on her, she still didn’t loosen her tone.

“There is no time to be stranded in a place like this! I- I must return as quickly as possible! Forget guard soldiers- cross the border using any means necessary! You, listen, in the event of our success, whatever reward- mmph!?”

At that moment, impolite to the extreme, two fingers pressed directly down on the lips of the tirading princess. While the other actors were dumbfounded, Ikta was looking down on the nobility in front of his eyes with a horribly cold expression.

“Quiet down a little, Princess. No matter how much you rant and dangle an extravagant reward in front of our noses, there’s no making the impossible possible. That degree of reason is something I’d like you to learn from history. That is, from our[23] history of repeating the same things to a sickening degree.”

“---H-how…!”

Having called him the benefactor of her life, the princess overlooked his shameless rudeness until now, but still, she was at a loss for words with this contempt. Since it escalated higher than she could handle, she didn’t know what to say back right away. In the end, there wasn’t a need for her to say anything. Since Yatori broke in between them, twisted Ikta’s arm up, and pulled his body to the ground without warning.

“--Your Highness, this thing has committed a grievous irreverence. Upon my word, he won’t speak such profanity a second time, so this time if you could somehow be merciful. In light of this thing’s service at the time of the ship sinking.”

Though she used enough strength to make his bones creak and his joints produce an unpleasant grinding sound, Yatori begged forgiveness in an unstrained voice. At her terrifying power, the princess forgot her fury and only shook her head vertically.

“I-t’s fine…. Certainly, it seems that I lacked composure…”

Ikta, having received forgiveness, was finally released from her defense technique. He stood without groaning once, but he was holding his twisted shoulder and seemed to be enduring considerable pain.

“You’ve reflected, haven’t you? Once you’ve given thanks for Her Highness’s generosity, go cool your head outside a bit.”

“Roger that.”

Leaving behind a reply which didn’t suggest that he’d reflected at all, Ikta left the cave together with Kusu. When his figure disappeared outside, Yatori turned to everyone remaining and made a single proposition.

“Whatever choice we make, there’s no point if no one has normal powers of judgment. It’s impossible to try to have a constructive discussion while hungry. For now, how about prioritizing our immediate survival and gathering food?”

“...Yep, I approve. If we can fill our stomachs, surely a good plan will come to mind.”

Following Torway, Haro and Matthew also agreed one by one. The last remaining, Her Highness, Princess Chamille, with the fiery haired girl’s intense eyes in front of her, had no other choice but to nod.

Chased out of the cave, Ikta began a food supply to satisfy his hunger without even being prompted by someone else. He appeared twisted on the surface, but, fundamentally, he was only moving according to the three main desires, and his behavioral principles were simple.

“Hm~m, cohune palm nuts sure are hard to harvest without a tool…”

Palm trees laden heavily with nuts were standing here and there, but he let them be for now and looked at the ground. When he concentrated his eyes intently, inside the damp brushwood, the living creatures of the forest, having greeted the morning, were moving around.

“Ah, he~y snake-san over there, quietly become meat for my plate, would you?… wha, you're long! S-s-s-so you were a python-sama? No, that- sorry, it was nothing.”

Watched intently by prey of an unexpected size, Ikta withdrew dejectedly. Ikta didn't possess the nerve to grapple with a three meter class serpent. Wearing a snake around one’s neck among other things wasn’t considered very fashionable.

“In times like this, maybe I should follow Mother Nature’s heartless principles, and aim for weak things rather than big game. ...Oh, I found a grasshopper. Al~right, if I fry and eat this one, it’ll smell pretty good...”

“This is only fine for us, however. Insect eating is low-class cuisine, so Her Highness, the Princess, will definitely reject it.”

As he continued chasing grasshoppers around on all fours, the voice of his friend, who not long ago mercilessly wrenched his shoulder to its limit, rang out from behind. Ikta continued his acquisition without turning around, but Yatori continued speaking regardless.

“That affair earlier wasn’t very like you. Even if he spits out sarcasm as easily as breathing, the one who'd never make it serious would be Ikta Solork, right?”

“Rather than being flawlessly consistent, it’s more charming for a character to be agitated once in a while.”

“Even if that’s the case, we can’t have your true character exposed here, can we? Show yourself taking a solid, composed action during a pressing state of emergency. There isn’t another appeal as effective as that, you know.”

Strangely, the exchange of words with Yatori in the lead stopped there. There, with a bundle of grasshoppers in one hand and his back turned to his companion, Ikta began to speak emphatically.

“Even like this, I’m reflecting, you see. I had the background knowledge that she was nobility, but I didn’t think that being flustered by someone in front of me would make me feel so aggravated.”

“That’s what I thought. ...So you can’t forgive a person of the ruling class behaving unintellectually?”

“Even though I was supposed to have given up a long time ago. Nothing would happen even if I didn’t allow it.”

Ikta gave a self-deprecating sigh. Yatori opened her mouth after choosing her words a little.

“...This is a slightly irreverent way of saying it, but the behavior of Her Highness, Chamille- before suggesting whether the Imperial Family is this way or that- is appropriate for her age. No, just not

bursting in tears with these circumstances is a sufficiently considerable thing, don't you think?"

"Right, that's it. For someone like me, just saying that I spoke with royalty is the best two-thirds of me. --Ah, by the way, if you have a knife, lend it to me?"

When Ikta skillfully turned around while crouching, Yatori, who was standing there, had unnoticedly armed herself with equipment without her clothing being disheveled in the slightest. She wore a saber on her right hip and on her left hip, a main gauche.

This was the two-handed swordsmanship stance that became the reason for the "Igsem of the Blade, Remeon of the Bullet" fame rivalry. As the air shooter was to Torway, this to her was the next precious thing to her life- the object of her pride.

"If you nick the blade, I'll kill you."

Even so, Yatori extremely easily removed the main gauche that was half of that pride from her hip and granted it to Ikta. Of course, she wouldn't allow that just anyone. However, concerning the strength of their relationship of mutual trust, there were parts that somehow exceeded the understanding of other people.

"So everyone's assembled. Well then, please report each of your harvests."

When the sun that was above the horizon had risen directly overhead, all six people assembled in front of the cave and contributed the results of their search for food. Flora and fauna of delectable color and form were lined up on the grass.

"Umm, since I wasn't very good at chasing prey that moved around, I tried gathering while focused on fruit and mushroom species. For mushrooms, with the Boletales supply as my focus, I gathered large, filling ones, but fruits were more of a problem, and…. At first, I thought that I might find bananas or papayas, but in actuality these were the only things I could harvest."

What Haro, saying that with a bit of a wry smile, was pointing at were fruits resembling orange bell peppers. There was easily enough for the number of people, and the vibrant, warmly-colored rind did indeed seem delicious. Her Highness, the Princess, having an interest, picked one up from the middle and looked at it.

"What kind of fruit is this? I haven't seen it before…"

"Ahh, Caju, right? Well, rather than being inedible, isn't it a hundred times more preferable? It's precious carbohydrate after all."

Everyone excluding the princess shared a forced smile. On her clueless behalf, Haro added an explanation.

"Princess, you've eaten cashew nuts before right? Those are a part of this fruit's seed."

“Oh, cashew nuts? If that’s the case, you seem to have an expectation for the taste?”

Not saying much, Haro only suggested, “Have a bite.”

As told, the princess, putting the orange fruit into her mouth, creased her brow and stiffened the moment her teeth bit into the surface. Her mouth regained freedom with about 30 seconds after apparently quite some difficulty biting through.

“How is it, Princess?”

”...It’s hard...puckery...grassy…. ...And, somewhat sweet…”

Despite being simple, the impressions hit the mark. Feeling for the first time that the atmosphere of the area relaxed even slightly, though the mood had yet to change completely, Torway took over.

“With that, I think it’s my turn next. Simple preparation in addition to good flavor, the coconut crab. Although I could only catch two since it’s the afternoon.”

Two enormous, bundled creatures resembling hermit crabs were laid out side by side on the grass. Voices of admiration spontaneously rose for them. Coconuts crabs hid in burrows in the ground during the afternoon. To be able to catch them, it was necessary to find the entrance to the burrow and dig them out, but that wasn’t an easy task.

“...The middle of the day, moreover in this short time, two specimens of this size? You’re not half-bad...”

Yatori was watching Torway with burning eyes, but the person himself, embarrassed at being watched by Yatori, averted his eyes and repeatedly scratched his face. They were two people on completely different wavelengths.

“With that, I’m next. ...It was a close fight, but I plan to take responsibility as the one who suggested this.”

Giving that introduction with a broad grin, Yatori walked off to a nearby bush and came back dragging her own prey out from there, which she’d hidden aiming for a surprise.

Shouts of joy rose immediately.

“Ehhh!? I-is that a wild boar...!? No way, how did you with just one person…!”

“One stroke of a sword at the nape of its neck… if you look, that’s the only wound. That being said, did you really use that sword…!?”

Yatori, having gathered looks of awe to herself, threw her chest out with pride. For her, who had been in a class of her own from the start, when she received those two things, admiration and respect, the more she received, the greater her priceless reward was.

“...Next is me, isn’t it, as I expected…”

At a glance, Matthew was in low spirits. Looking at the harvest he brought in, it was no wonder.

“Although I’d like to proceed that way… What is this? Three smallish palm nuts- that’s fine, but the rind is broken and the juice inside all but leaked outside, isn’t it? I’m curious what kind of harvesting method you used that it ended up like this.”

“.... When I tried to harvest palm nuts, they were in a higher place than I thought. Since they didn’t fall when I threw rocks, I thought I’d rather try to shoot them down...”

His partner, the wind spirit Tsuu, turned to Matthew from his hip pouch with anxious eyes. Even though no one said anything, his eyes and the air shooter barrel worn on his back his told the entire story of his failure.

“...My buddy Matthew, every tool has has its uses. You can’t fire your gun to reach a solution for everything, you see. That kind of random shooting spree, without mincing words it’s something third world countries do.”

“Y-you’re the last person I wanna hear that from! Aren't you worse off than I am?”

Quite the dangerous joke slipped out of Ikta’s mouth, but before anyone noticed, Matthew’s shout changed the conversation’s target. Cold stares were concentrating on Ikta’s harvest which was piled in a mountain his feet.

“...Cicadas, grasshoppers, long-horned beetles, water scavenger beetles, giant water bugs, every kind of caterpillar…. How should I put it, that, it’s an extremely wild line-up, isn’t it...”

“W-well insects were the most convenient source of protein. Don't you think so?”

“And frogs…? You considered preservation and dried it- well, can I give you an evaluation?”

Although Ikta received a very delicate evaluation, the person himself whistled without eating. Her Highness, the Princess, looking at the food he gathered, lost some color in her face and timidly asked a question.

“Y-you, eat this...? That is, how should I say it, are they really insects…?”

“Of course I eat it. This is my personal opinion, but giant water bugs are so disgusting I could die.”

“Hey- that’s where you should smooth things over! ...Your Highness, the Princess, please relax. Since even if you don't touch the insects, there is flexibility in the food we have."

Her Highness, the Princess, breathed a sigh of relief. Putting the ingredients they scraped up in front of her, Haro got fired up and rolled up her sleeves.

"With that, shall we immediately prepare some food? Even if I say that, although since we don't have

a pot, we can only basically fry it. If we use things like leaves and clay cleverly, I wonder if we can manage something like steaming in a covered pot...?"

"Putting aside the part we could eat now, I'd like to smoke the boar meat, but sending up conspicuous amounts of smoke isn't the best. Matthew, Torway, can have your partners suck in the smoke?"

When the cooking began under Haro and Yatori's leadership, nice smells immediately began to drift around the cave.

The performance of Haro, who'd been entrusted with the cooking, was surprisingly good, and when the sun began go down, they were able to take a late lunch. With the sensation that they were being restored to life, the six people stuffed their cheeks with their first decent meal in roughly two days.

"The meat is delicious~ You didn't even add any seasonings, but when I bite through, strong flavor comes out..."

"The steamed mushrooms and coconut crab are pretty good too. If I have any complaints, there isn't enough salt."

"If you boil sea water, you can get it easily, but if we go out to the shore, there really is too much of an unobstructed view. It'll be bad if we're found by Kioka soldiers watching from the national border, so I guess we'll make do with the taste of the raw materials here."

Surrounding all sorts of menu items which were placed on leaves and lined up on the ground, they continued a harmonious dinner within their limitations. When some time passed, Matthew, who suddenly regained energy with food in front of him, began revealing his positive view on their failures until now.

"I've been thinking the whole time, you see, since we have two air shooters here, isn't it possible to even cross the national border depending on how we do it? Since somewhere on the long border, there has to be a place where their guard is understaffed."

"When your stomach is full, you sure become cocky, don't you? However, just listening to Ikta's story- perhaps Kioka is focusing their course of advance to the side of the Empire in this area- their defense seems quite strong. Even if we walk along the national border to a place where their surveillance becomes thin, I think the odds are 10 to 1 that we'll be discovered enroute."

Matthew, having received Yatori's relentless criticisms, folded his arms and hummed. Next to him, Ikta inserted a remark while tossing grilled grasshoppers into his mouth.

"We can't take crossing the national border lightly. A chance of success is born only after there is an assistant to both this side and the other side of the line. We don't have that person. Although preferably if we can bribe a soldier it'll probably be quick, but as for goods that might turn into money among these members' belongings…"

Ikta's eyes were turned to the hand of Her Highness, the Princess, picking at the coconut crab meat- to be exact to the small ring fitted onto it. Speaking of straightforward valuables, that fit the bill, but still

it was too much.

“...It might be a stretch to try and bribe the Republic’s soldiers with a ring openly engraved with the Imperial Family crest. If that’s the case, it’s still realistic to sell Yatori’s two blades. The craftsmanship is plain, but that, it’s quite a sharp blade right?”

“Oh, what an expert eye. Who was it I wonder who was allowed to prepare a frog with that sharp blade?”

“It was you used it to bring down a wild boar, no? A blade is a swordsman’s life.”

It was Ikta’s hypocritical excuse, but at any rate, there was no change in that it was insufficient as bribery material.

With the topic about to be paused since everyone was thinking, Her Highness, the Princess, who had been silent until now, opened her mouth for the first time.

“...Whether we’ll cross the national border on our own, or content ourselves as prisoners of war. Everyone has been contributing wisdom for a while, and when a plan where we can expect an adequate chance of success emerges, or if possibly nothing emerges, I want the decision made properly. ...The reality is that nothing changes no matter how much shout. I trust your judgment power and effectiveness.”

Hearing her speech, the other actors stared at the princess with surprised expressions. Ikta’s abusive words became a point of regret for himself who had spoken them, but they seemed to have also prompted the side that heard them to some reflection. In any case, that she was moved a small degree from the discussion was a desirable thing. Since, from a genuine standpoint, no matter what kind of unreasonable demand was spoken by Her Highness, the Princess, the others had to obey.

“...As Her Highness said, there’s no need to rush the decision, right? We can’t be leisurely about it, but let’s thoroughly take time to decide. Since we can’t be easily found here, and the difficulty of survival isn’t that high in this environment. I think it’s fine if we have take one or two days as thinking time.”

Everyone agreed to Yatori’s words and established a lengthy grace period for the present.

When lunch ended in the middle of an atmosphere which was quiet in its own way. Everyone, having recovered their energy and stamina, was outdoors each spending time on work for securing and maintaining their living space. But--since that was the case, because she had neither survival knowledge nor experience, one person emerged twiddling her thumbs.

“--Yatori, what is that used for?”

While idly coming and going in and out of the cave, Her Highness, Princess Chamille talked to her scene partner who continued her manual labor in silence. Not stopping her hands which proceeded with their work, Yatori turned just her face toward her scene partner. Her partner, the fire spirit Shia,

also sent an indifferent gaze from her hip pouch.

“Yes, Your Highness. I’m making a simple alarm device that uses nuts and string. If we lay this around our surroundings, when someone comes close, the nuts of the tree hanging down near the entrance of the cave will make noises and alert us.

Yatori’s answer was crisp and fluent, already just like a soldier’s. When the princess tried to say, “is there something I can help with,” she had already finished her work and promptly stood up vigorously.

“Then, I’ll install the finished product and come back. I apologize for forcing your inconvenience, but please don’t go out further than the range visible from the cave.”

When she confirmed that her companion nodded, Yatori jauntily turned her body around and disappeared into the trees. Her Highness, the Princess, having once more lost her place, drew closer nearby Haro, the sole remaining person of the same gender.

“Haro, what are you doing?”

“Ah, Princess. Umm, now I’m making medicinal plants that are effective for swelling into a paste. If you are cautious about injuries, you can avoid them, but you can’t do that as much for insects bites.”

On top of a stone with a sunken center that she must have chosen on her own as a substitute for a container, Haro was grinding leaves, roots, and the like. Her partner, the water spirit Miru, was standing on the stone’s edge, and occasionally poured water from the “water spout” on his torso, helped Haro make smooth paste.

“Is there something, that I can also help with?”

“Huh? No, no, that’s- to borrow your hands, Princess! Please go on resting!”

“I-I see.”

Compelled by Haro’s intensity, who was rapidly shaking her head horizontally, Her Highness, the Princess, with neither knowledge nor experience at hand, withdrew unable to say anything. Something that even I can do-- while thinking that, she shifted her gaze to another place.

“Oi, Torway. That air shooter, isn’t the barrel a little too long?”

“Umm… It’s because I want to aim accurately as far as possible, and I can’t no matter what with something shorter than this. Although if I were a hunting soldier, who’d have to shoot while charging, then Maa-kun , as you say a shorter one might be better.”

Tsuu and Safi, the two wind spirits, while sucking in smoke, were sending out fresh air and controlling the open fire. Around there, Matthew and Torway were holding their air shooters in their hands.

“...Mmm.”

Even here, she didn’t feel that she could easily force her way in. After hesitating and hesitating, she reluctantly chose Ikta Solork, who was sitting slightly removed from the cave’s entrance,

“...Solork. If you’re doing something, is there something I can also help with?”

Her calling of only this person by his family name and not his first name expressed her complex mental state. But then, the person who was called, without an indication that he sensed it, continued his manual labor without looking aside.

“Nn, you’ll lend me a hand? I’m weaving these vines like this.”

When she looked into his hands, he knitting sturdy vines together and making some sort of woven object. Concluding it might an animal snare or something, Her Highness, the Princess, learned by imitation and took part in the work.

“Right, right, like that. There isn’t really a need to make it pretty.”

“I see, understood.”

It was her first experience making something with her own hands, but once she understood the trick, the task wasn’t that hard. While moving her hands on the object in silence without any conversation, the princess repeatedly stole glances at Ikta’s face.

He is an oblivious male, she thought at first. Considering those rash remarks from earlier, and that he let me help with the work normally, I wonder if he doesn’t differentiate between social statuses at all.

“Your hands stopped moving.”

Finally, the directness of even giving that reminder. The princess, unembarrassed, eagerly wove the vines. After about 10 minutes, their whole-hearted work came to fruition, and the thing the two of them were making was finished.

"...Solork, what is this? It doesn't seem like it's wide enough for a net."

"It is an essential item necessary to a human lifestyle, much more so than a net. Will you try using it?"

Saying that and standing up, Ikta cleared a suitable space, chose two standing trees, and stretched the woven vines between them like a spiderweb. Looking at the readied object, he nodded with satisfaction.

"It's pretty good craftsmanship. --Well, go on."

"'Go on'... you say, but-"

Being urged on was fine, but this was comparable to a situation where nothing could be done since

Her Highness, the Princess didn't know what the thing was used for at all. As she stood still with a confused face, Ikta took the initiative and went out before her.

"Put your hips in a little. You use it like this, see."

He agilely placed his hips on the vines, and using them as a pivot point to rotate his body, turned sideways with his body swinging between the trees.

Watching that figure, Her Highness, the Princess, finally enlightened about what it was used for, thought of the time and labor that was spent and hung her shoulders.

"...A bed, right?"

"It's something called a navy purveyor, that is to say, a hammock[24]. When you get used to it, it's quite comfortable."



He spoke while skillfully climbing off using movements reversed from when he got on. Ikta recommended the,-as he put it- "essential item necessary to a human lifestyle" to Her Highness, the Princess, a second time. The princess was a princess, and- drifting toward the idea that she wanted to take back at least the cost of her help- timidly placed her hips on the hammock.

"Right, right, now as if straightening your body with your hips as an axis-- Oh, wow, you were able to get on without a problem, weren't you?"

Ikta clapped his hands for the princess who somehow succeeded in lying down. She was made to feel ridiculous, but experiencing a hammock's snugness for the first, she didn't have the time to say something about it.

"Although, beginners usually overturn once when getting on. Your highness is pretty talented."

"Were you hoping that I would overturn just now...? H-however this doesn't suit me. Rather, I'm afraid it might fall. I can't believe there are actually people who can sleep on this."

"Don't be so nervous, please relax your strength in the most stable position. Rather than laying out leaves on the bare earth and sleeping, I think you know that this is much more comfortable."

She adjusted her body position, and at the end of her troubles, when she found a position that couldn’t possibly unstable, the princess made up her mind and dismissed the strength from her body. For a moment, she that that she might overturn, but the makeshift hammock was unexpectedly taking her her body weight securely.

When she overcame the first hurdle, the composure to simply enjoy the circumstances was finally born in the princess. First of all, her perspective- that itself was fresh. The well-bred princess hadn’t had the experience of lying down outdoors until now.

The pleasant sound of leaves rustled in her ear, and the blueness of the sky peeking through the gaps in the green ceiling was beautiful. Due to the good ventilation of her back, she didn’t mind the heat that much. After falling into a dark ocean and opening her eyes to a dark cave, this felt like somewhere in her ever stiffened heart, something was coming unraveled.

“...I see, this isn’t bad. I feel at ease.”

“Right? The beginning of a single perfect day is only from a comfortable bed.”

The princess was thinking that it was amusing how Ikta puffed out his chest, but, suddenly, something cut across the piece of blue sky she was looking up at. Initially, she wondered if it was a bird, but the movements were too slow for that.

"...Solork. The strange thing floating on the sky, do you know what that is?"

Charged with that question, Ikta searched up at the sky, but the instant the same thing arrived in his line of sight, his expression immediately became grim. From there, his right arm firmly pushed his body weight on one side of the hammock.

"--Wha!?"

As he kept watch, Ikta's arm cleanly caught the body of the princess, who was on the verge of overturning and falling. Neglecting the dazed girl, he turned his heels and hastily began walking.

"They are Kiokan Aerial Warfare soldiers. One aircraft flying without setting a formation means that its mission is either reconnaissance or patrolling. Whichever it is, if it's in a position that we can see from here, then there's the fear that we'll be found by them as well. It's too bad especially since it seemed that you were understanding the joys of a hammock, but we're holing up in the cave for a while."

Giving her approval after the fact, the princess was carried off nearly without consent. She just surrendered to that audacity, but when she was being carried by not particularly strong arms, a memory was unintentionally brought back.

From inside his arms, Her Highness, Chamille, quietly peeked at Ikta's face. Then, she remembered —that she had her first encounter with this man inside the cold ocean, within the single beam of light that shredded the despair and darkness.

Faced with the existence of the Aerial Warfare soldiers, everyone hid inside the cave as a cautionary measure, but before long the blimp hid its form inside a low cloud, and at approximately the same time, sunset arrived. However, for a while after that, the reality that they were "being watched from the sky" proved to be a great pressure, and the number of words they spoke became few.

Dead of night that same day. Inside the cave echoing with their individual, unconscious breathing, Her Highness, the Princess, opened her eyes.

In addition, it was not because Matthew's snoring was loud. Her sleep wasn't disturbed to that extent. Despite that being the case, waking up was the result of a more severe, pressing circumstance.

Fortunately, it seemed that everyone including the spirits was sleeping well. The princess stealthily went out alone.

"...If I'm here, then I should be fine."

When she came to a grove of trees fairly removed from the cave, the princess, anxiously looking around, reviewed the area and, after hesitating quite a bit, lowered her underpants along with her shorts. Since she met the experience of relieving herself outdoors once in her life during the afternoon, this was only her second time. She didn't want to become even this accustomed to it over an eternity.

"...Whew…"

Taking time and finishing urinating, Her Highness, the Princess, took a handkerchief from the pocket of her coat and used it to wipe. Ordinarily, this would be when she'd throw it away, but now, it was her single precious sheet. She would need to wash it with water and dry it.

She raised her underpants while feeling miserable, and when she thought to stand up, then--.

“--There, who’s there!?”

The rustling sound of someone pushing through brushwood, and next the hoarse, echoing voice, made time stand still for the princess.

Going slightly back in time. The noise of rattling when hard fruits collide woke four of the five inside the cave who were lying in the depths of slumber, excluding Matthew.

“--Everyone, please wake up! Something crossed our trip wire!”

“...Whaa!?”

Yatori’s voice, perfectly suppressed as to not echo outside, along with rousing Matthew, stirred vigilance in the already awoken actors. A moment later, a lamp that dimly radiated light burned inside the cave. A white light different from a flame-- It was a lantern from the light spirit Kusu, whom Ikta had been hugging as he slept.

“...Wh-what? The Princess…?”

Haro frantically rubbed her sleepy eyes and looked around the area, but the figure of Her Highness, Chamille, wasn’t anywhere. The moment they realized that fact, Yatori, Ikta, Torway- those three stood up nearly simultaneously.

“...Yatori, Torway, two seconds. Ready your weapons.”

Even before that was said by Ikta, two swords were worn on Yatori’s hip, and Torway was finished installing his air shooter barrel the torso of his partner, the wind spirit Safi. Kusu and Shia also stored their bodies in their respective pouches.

“We can go anytime. --But Ik-kun, you’re going unarmed?”

“It’s the forest at night. There’s no weapon superior to a light spirit, and if there’s no light your air shooter’s useless.”

“When I looked, the one that moved was the second sensor from the left. Our opponent is straight on our left when we leave the cave.”

Haro and Matthew, in contrast with the three who were exchanging knowing looks, weren’t keeping up with the change in their situation. However, among Yatori’s group, the people from which one could expect a proper performance during an emergency, no one urged on the remaining two people after figured out their objective.

“Matthew, Haro. If we don’t come back, please choose to become prisoners of war without hesitation.”

Taking Yatori's short and severe words as a signal, the three went off running outside the cave.

She'd been found by the enemy. The instant she understood the reality, Her Highness, the Princess, couldn't make any kind of reaction. While making the dry sound of stepping on dead branch, she knew that the presence was rapidly coming closer. Rough footsteps and breathing overlapped and began to be audible. He wasn't alone. Was it two, or three, or more-- the princess, in a state of half-panic, didn't know what to do with her thoughts, which were spinning uselessly as if to make up for her unmoving body.

"Quickly raise both your hands and come out! We have a gun, if there is strange behavior, we'll shoot you on the spot!"

The noun gun, the verb shoot- she remembered for a second time the image of death carved out in stormy sea. Even though she had to escape quickly, when that happened, her body listened less and less to what she was saying. While facing her ruin, this time as well as before, holding her breath and crouching down was the best she could do, but--

"S-stop, don't shoot! I'm coming out now…!"

A panicked shriek rose from the shadows of a tree other than the area where Her Highness, the Princess, was crouching. Her firmly shut eyes opened widely. That was undeniably Ikta Solork's voice.

"Over there! Don't make any more movements, we'll confirm your location from here."

Following that voice, a dazzling light ran through the center of the dark forest. The enemies, seeming to have a light spirit holder as well, used a high beam and started probing the source of the voice. Before long, a black haired youth was illuminated inside the white light.

"Your speech, that's a dialect from the Empire, isn't it? Who the hell are you?! Why are you here!?"

"I-I escaped the Empire and came here! Since the war won't ever end, and my house was burned up by Aerial Warfare soldiers, I'm really fed up with that Empire! I mean, the Republic's looking pretty good, ain't it!? Take me with you as an ally...!"

Every single word of Ikta's lines implied desperation, and even to Her Highness, the Princess, who was listening nearby, it didn't seem to be an act. He was clinging merely to hope and fleeing here, just a refugee begging for his life.

"...I thought that's what it was, another refugee, huh."

"Ahh, that's right! On the night of the storm the day before yesterday, I crossed the border by sea! Rolled up in the waves, I thought I was going to die, but like finally, I barely made it!"

"What about your allies? You came here alone!?"

"My mom is with me! She's sleeping the cave in the place straight in front of here! She's not doin' so

hot ‘cause she kept on being hit by the rain. I mean, you guys are Kioka Army soldiers, right!? Help us out!”

While squinting his eyes in the radiance of the high beam, Ikta continued his words with a desperate expression. His fervent speech seeming to have born results, the men, wearing deep green military uniforms with their air shooters readied, slowly approached him.

“We understand the circumstances, lead us the cave. You can relax. The Republic universally accepts refugees.”

“...You’re going to help us? T-thanks, it’s this way! It ain’t that far-- Ah, ow!”

Ikta, turning his body with a face as if meeting the Buddha in hell- possibly having a bad experience with a tree root- stumbled forcefully. When he hastily tried to get back up, this time he gave a scream and ending up crouching.

“Hss, I twisted my ankle…. S-soldier, sorry, but won’t you lend me a shoulder…?!”

“You’re a troublesome guy, aren’t you. ...Hey, Nihad. You help too. Also Irik, we don’t need the high beam anymore, so come here with a lantern.”

One soldier holding an air shooter already came and took Ikta’s hand. Furthermore from behind, the man with the light spirit walked over while changing the light emitted from the “light cavity” into a gentle lantern.

“I-is this all of you guys? My mom can’t walk on her own, and even for carrying her, the help…”

“We’re the only ones who come here. But, if she’s not a very plump madame, we should be fine.”

“...I see. ‘’So it’s only you guys’’?”

Ikta, mumbling quietly, innocently stretched both his arms. Doing that, he tightly grasped, one each in his left and right palms, the air shooter barrels of the soldiers whose hands he borrowed to stand up.

“...Wha!? What are you doing?! Let go of my hand--”

“Pattern 3! Destroy them, Yatori, Torway!”

Just when Ikta shouted facing the darkness of the background, the modest yet piercing sound of firing air shooter echoed. A soldier, the light spirit holder, the flesh of his face grazed by a lead bullet, held his cheek and raised a scream.

“...gh, missing by that much…!”

The voice of Torway reverberated, manic with irritation. An extremely effective first strike was completely wasted. The Kioka army soldiers, sensing that they had fallen for a trap, immediately began recovering their stance.

“Irik, are you alright!? Stop the light immediately and fall back! There are air shooter holders among the other group as well, we’ll be targets like this!

While kicking at Ikta, who seized the guns, as if tearing him off, the middle aged soldier who appeared to be the leader yelled in a loud voice. It was the correct judgment given the situation, but that was why it was possible for Ikta to predict it.

“...Kusu, Searchlight...!”

Withstanding the pain of being kicked, despite stubbornly clinging to the barrels, Ikta also sent out instructions. Kusu, previously on standby in a tree with good perspective, received them and emitted a high beam from his torso. The wounded soldier who tried to extinguish the light and slip into the darkness was illuminated a second time in the middle of the darkness.

“B-bright… gah!”

The fourth shot Torway fired pierced under the hands he held up trying to block the light. The bullet penetrated his eyeball and reached his brain, and their pitiable foe sunk into an eternal sleep from which he wouldn't wake again.

“--Irik!? Damn, I won’t let you get away, you bastard!”

A full-bodied kick heavy with anger thrust Ikta aside and knocked his body to the ground.

“Die, Imperial scum!”

The mouths of two guns, hungry for a meal, were pointed at Ikta who’d exposed his defenselessness. However, the instant the triggers were about to be mercilessly pulled-- a red shadow racing through the brushwood danced around the backs of the two Kioka soldiers.

“--The wind-!”

Trails of silver cleaved the darkness. A saber on the right cut down the neck of the first, and with a flowing sequence of movements, a main gauche on the left stabbed the back of the second. Living up to the fame of the “Igsem of the Blade”, from the time she approached until Yatori brought down the enemy, not two seconds had passed.

The two bodies collapsed with a thud at roughly the same time. However, they couldn’t be careless yet. Facing right and left, while turning the tips of her saber and main gauche toward both necks, Yatori gave a warning.

“Don’t move, spirits! If you resist, your masters die!”

Despite fumbling with their long air shooter barrels, the strings of escaped wind spirits trying hard to stand up on the other side stopped at her words. ...All spirits acted with the lives of the humans with whom they made an agreement as their top priority. Taking their partners hostage was an effective way of rendering spirits powerless.

"Ikta, you're alright? --Torway! Take the spirits of the opponents I brought down with you!"

Nodding at Yatori's instructions, Torway cautiously approached the side of the fallen soldiers. The corpses were lying face down. The figure of the remaining light spirit, shaking his master's body with small hands, was heartbreaking.

"...Spirit, your master has already-"

Died- Torway couldn't utter that word at the moment. It wasn't impossible. Until now he had been able to lose himself in entering the battlefield, but for him and his allies, this was their first time in actual combat.

The instant one experiences the reality of "I killed someone" varies depending on the person. In Torway's case, that wasn't when the one he killed was in front of him, but rather, he experienced it strongly when he "saw the figures of those remaining".

"Torway, leave that luxury for later. It's not over yet."

Ikta's callous advice snatched the time to bask in sentimentality away from the soldier in his first fight. Torway firmly stifled the emotions welling from the depths of his heart, and, taking up in his arms the spirits standing motionless in the wake of their masters' deaths, returned in the direction of his allies.

"Nnn, the one whose neck you cut is dead. Seems like the only one who's still breathing is the one whose back you stabbed."

Sitting near the collapsed enemy, Ikta confirmed the deaths of their scene partners. The usual easy-going youth wasn't there. From the moment the alarm sounded, he was- more than anyone- composed, and cruel.

"Sorry, I didn't have the time to think about capturing them alive…"

Yatori, who had personally cut them down, had the belief that they were fatal wounds. Ikta also assumed that and nodded.

"There's nothing we can do. Well his mouth at least should be functioning."

Saying that, he turned the body of the enemy soldier face up. The stab wound missed the heart, appearing to have somehow punctured the lungs, and the enemy soldier's breathing was whistling and shaky. At any rate, it was clear from the amount of blood loss that there wasn't much of his life remaining, but Ikta, in addition to knowing that, began talking to him.

"Hey, you can hear me, right? Your name is? Ahh, actually never mind your name. You have a name tag."

Ikta's hand stretched and removed the sheet copper hanging from the soldier's neck. Confirming that he was being watched by his companion's eyes, which were losing their light, continued further.

“Member of the Seventh Independent Battalion of the Republic Army, Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare. You’re a rather unlucky new recruit.”

“...S-save me…”

“We’ll give you medical care. However, that’s after you’ve answered our questions. If you don’t speak clearly, we’re leaving you and going back.”

Ikta dangled a superficial hope in front of his eyes, but the dying soldier had no choice but to cling to it. Considering that his remaining life was ticking away, the questions started.

“Question One-- Where is your base? Approximately how far is the location?”

“...T-to the east, half a day with a blimp…”

“Alright, that’s good. Question Two-- For what mission, and how many forces were mobilized? Your reason for landing here?”

“...Mission, patrolling the inside of the border… forces... forces, not united…. Squads of three per group, came here on blimps…. Landing here, a cave good for camping...hack, hack.”

In the middle of his answer, Private Nihad spit out a cough mixed with blood. While expressionlessly wiping a drop of blood that caught on his face, Ikta continued the questioning.

“I see, so it was to pass the night above ground. Well then, Question Three-- where is the blimp you came on?”

“..., …”

“I can’t hear you. The medical care will be too late, answer properly.”

“...Leave, the forest, straight along the beach…. It's cold… please… please stop the blood…”

“Got it, next is the last question. --Nihad Hyu. Have you been to the border?”

Mustering his strength and turning his neck left and right, Nihad coughed violently and spit out blood a second time. With that at it’s peak, his breathing rapidly weakened...within the passing of a minute, the rising and falling motion of his chest disappeared completely.

Murmuring a short, “good work,” to the young man who couldn’t answer anything anymore, Ikta stood up.

“Ahh, you can come out now, Princess. Everyone’s dead.”

At that dispassionate voice, Her Highness, hiding in the trees, froze her body. There was something that rejected outsiders in the atmosphere around Ikta at the moment.

Noticing Her Highness, the Princess, was frightened, Yatori went to receive the girl on her own in the course of her own assumptions.

“Your Highness, it’s Yatori. Please come here. Ahh, thank goodness, you were unharmed.”

Her shoulder propped up by Yatori, the princess finally stood up properly. As the two returned together, Ikta, gathering the spirits who lost their masters in one place, turned to them and made a proposal.

"It's too bad, but your partners- they all died. I'm sure there are those among you who want to report their deaths back to their unit or something. But, we can't allow that. Because we’re going to stay alive."

Neither a negotiation nor a persuasion, that was a kind of formality. When only the enemy spirits who'd lost their masters remained on the battlefield, concerning their treatment, that was decided by the Scriptures of Alderah, which preached friendship between humans and spirits.

“I swear on the name of Alderamin, Supreme God of the heavens, that we will reincarnate you in the Church of the Empire, and thereafter promise you appropriate treatment as prisoners of war. --Therefore, please entrust them to us, your souls.

A while after granting audience to Ikta’s words, as they made a sound like hard objects being rubbed together, the three spirits fell over facedown. From the napes of their necks, one section of black slate measuring several centimeters flew out. It was called a “soul stone,” the source of a spirit’s will.

“...Thank you. They are in our care.”

When he handed them to his allies after collecting and picking them up with his fingers, Ikta crouched in there and took on his shoulder Nihad’s corpse, still left with the warmth from his lifetime. At his action, Torway revealed his confusion.

“Huh, you’re carrying the dead body...? If they don’t have any more allies, then if we hide the body in the brushwood...”

“We're safe for the time being. Torway, you can bask in the sentimentality of your first fight as much as you want now.”

A strong voice interrupted his sound reasoning. While advancing his heavy stride step by step, Ikta spoke as if he was struggling.

“Therefore, allow that luxury to me as well. --This guy spoke clearly, didn’t he?”

No one was there who had the privilege to advance a different opinion.

After everything, with about two round trips, the remains of the Kioka soldiers were carried to the vicinity of the cave without a single one left behind. Matthew and Haro, greeting the four who returned, breathed a sigh of relief before anything. After that, Matthew went outside together with

Ikta, and Haro was assigned to look after Her Highness, the Princess, who was in a slight state of shock.

Currently inside the cave, there remained two groups: Haro and Her Highness, the Princess, and Yatori and Torway. Torway was looking at his own air shooter before the open fire, with an expression as depressed as that of the princess.

“...To miss, by that much…”

He failed to bring down the enemy with the first shot, and as a result he appeared to feel guilty for having exposed Ikta to those dangerous eyes. On the opposite side across the open fire, while holding her sword in her hand, Yatori cut into the conversation.

“A moving enemy is completely different from targets during training. If you brought him down with four shots, then that’s a good performance for your first fight.”

“But, the enemy was nearly stationary…”

“I’m saying, anyone would be nervous in in that situation. It’s normal that one couldn’t produce even half of their true ability.”

“That’s no more than an excuse. Just now, Yatori-san and Ik-kun were composed and devoted your very best.”

Yatori huffily stood up and held the face of Torway, who was stuck in a loop of self-condemnation, with both hands.

“Don’t get too full of yourself, Torway Remeon. Don’t value yourself over something like being able to do the same things as me and Ikta. The talents people have are completely different things depending on the individual. Concerning strength of performance, I pride myself in losing to no one. Being imitated easily would be unbearable.”

Torway widened his eyes and looked at her, but at the same time he couldn’t help but notice. That Yatori’s palms, touching his cheeks, were cold, and that they were trembling slightly even now.

That was right. Today, for the first time in her life, she also stole the life of a stranger with those hands.

“What’s important, is that you reliably perform the tasks that you’re able to. As air shooter holders, you and Matthew are valuable assets at the moment. Since the worst bullet, even if it doesn’t hit, can make your opponent cautious. This time, since you made the enemy extinguish his light with that, wasn’t I able to approach relatively safely?”

Hearing that, Torway took on a slightly comforted expression. Yatori huffed and pulled back.

“...You ought to learn little from watching Ikta. He may be carefree, but that guy always knows the things he can and can’t do, and acts accordingly. This time, since he couldn’t become an immediate

asset, he undertook the dangerous role of decoy, and the other wretched role. Would you have been able to complete that interrogation on a dying human?”

Torway dropped his gaze and kept silent. He remembered the figures of the bewildered spirits near the dead bodies..

“You wouldn’t have, right? But, you’re fine like that. For now, at least. That is to say, your role in this party is to be a kind, gentlemanly older brother. You shouldn’t feel obliged to do more. Ikta sees himself and stands in that position.”

“...Yatori-san, you understand Ikta rather well, don’t you.”

Yatoiri shrugged her shoulders and ambiguously answered, “who knows,” to the young man gazing at her with conflicted expression.

Her Highness, Chamille, apparently having recovered her composure somehow as the result of Haro’s comforting, talked to Yatori, who seemed to just be finishing holding her sword, in a stiffened voice.

“Yatori, may I also see the corpses of the Kioka soldiers?”

“...That’s- my apologies, but-”

Yatori hesitated slightly, but seeing the princess’s tormented expression, the words, “I don’t think you should,” drew back inside her throat. Binding to her belt her two swords stored in their sheaths, she took the hand of Her Highness, the Princess, and went outside the cave.

Three corpses were lined up beneath a noticeably large dipterocarp tree. Their military uniforms and tags were stripped off, leaving only their undergarments. Suggesting that they would be useful later on, the one who stripped all they had from the unsuspecting dead was also Ikta. Her Highness, the Princess, couldn’t understand this simple idea.

“...I heard that Solork outwitted them by pretending to be a refugee from the Empire.”

“Ha…”

“What kind of reaction did the Kioka soldiers have? Were they rough, or were they courteous?”

When Yatori considered Her Highness, the Princess’s mental state, she couldn’t answer easily. However, in the end, she injure the honor of the dead by lying.

“...I think, that they were courteous. It seemed they- no, the current Republic itself is proactive in regards to accepting refugees. If the Republic warmly receives escaped Imperial citizens, the people from the Eastern Province who abandon their country and flee will increase higher and higher, and that is linked with the effect of the reduction in the Empire’s power.”

“Our opponents who stretched out a hand to accept us, we killed them with a sneak attack…”

Yatori could see that she was slightly uncomfortable. ...Was she feeling guilty about killing the soldiers of the neighboring state with which they were at war in with unfair methods? Not that she didn't understand, but wasn't the Imperial Family's wording strange?... At the least, as the official stance of the nation, every war conducted should be founded in the name of justice. And even though Her Highness, Chamille was a member of the Imperial Family, in other words, a chief figure which assumed the name of that justice-

"That is the truth. However, Your Highness, your words-"

The princess shook her head and interrupted Yatori, who opened her mouth to defend her own and her allies' honor.

"Everyone says it, I understand. --This is my responsibility. The one who ordered you to, 'send me safely back to the Empire,' was none other than myself. How could I criticize you?"

While staring intently at the dead bodies of the Kioka soldiers, Her Highness, the Princess, was unconsciously gnawing the center of her index finger. The words that could be overheard from her mouth were no longer directed towards anyone.

"...Three people died here. As long as we go on like this, more people will continue to die. Both friends and enemies… The nation that is supposed to exist to support people's lives, why does its Imperial Family continue to idly damage lives in this way as well...?"

Her soliloquy continued endlessly. Even though the teeth gnawing her finger had broken through skin, the person herself didn't notice.

"Forgive me… please forgive me..., I must return home alive…. In order to precede the moment the large tree decays and collapses by even one second, I must do anything to return…. Even if my punishment is Hell, somehow…. Even if my limbs are torn off, or my intestines dragged out… even if I'm lined up with the reigning emperor and crucified, so…"

Blood trickled down from the skin of her finger. The color of her eyes was clearly unusual. Although the princess continued to mumble as if she were delirious, Yatori, aware that she was her attendant, hesitated to-

"--Calm yourself, Princess. A luxury such as self-mutilation is one that ought to be enjoyed once you've returned home safely."

Fortunately, Ikta, having come back, crossed that line in her stead. The princess, her arm grabbed by the youth and possibly startled by the sudden contact, entered a state of panic and flailed her arms and legs.

"Let go, let go, Solork...! Who said it was fine to touch me…?!"

"Excuse me for not earning something like your approval. More importantly, look, blo~od is coming out, blood. Your hand is completely red, isn't it? Do you understand that this red fluid is literally a drop of your life in that condition you're in?"

“Blood, blood, you say?! I don’t care. This annoying substance ought to leak out without a single drop remaining! You don’t understand by seeing it? ‘’It’s rotten, this is rotten!’’ My blood- the Katjvanmaninik bloodline- was corrupted a long time ago!”

While struggling even more violently, Her Highness, the Princess, shouted incomprehensible things. Ikta watched over her condition with a serious face, but before long, as he breathed a light sigh, he forcibly pulled the princess’s arm toward himself, and without saying a word pressed his lips onto the wound on her finger.

“--Wha!?”

Even Her Highness, the Princess, stopped struggling and froze. Ikta roughly sucked the fluid flowing from her wounded index finger with his mouth until the bleeding lessened, then releasing his lips as if nothing happened.

“I don’t sense it by seeing it, nor by tasting it. ...Princess, the stuff called blood is continually created and replaced inside the body, you see. It won’t become rotten as long as it’s inside living creatures. Therefore, whether it’s annoying or whatever, your way of saying it was unscientific.”

“...Un...scienti…?”

“It’s a neologism by the intellectuals. In short, it’s a bothersome and unreasonable way of thinking that’s largely useless. You don’t need want nor adhere to it; you ought to think more simply and see the true nature of everything. --For the time being, you want to return to the Empire, don’t you?”

At the question, the princess returned a reflective nod. Ikta lifted his lips in a smile.

“If that’s the case, you should only think about staying alive. When you distribute energy to unnecessary things, your troubles just increase. Besides, Princess-- you may have forgotten, but when the ship sunk, I myself was struggling to save you. ...This is nothing in the realm of hardships. But if it becomes a strain and I’m unhappy, I will feel only hatred on the day it becomes a wasted effort.”

Ikta’s hands held her small right hand between them. The same warmth as before reached the princess across their skin.

“So please treat your life with care. Even a small wound is connected to a major disease like tetanus, you know.”

“...Solork. So you didn’t hate me…?”

“Nope, I don’t think anything in regards to Your Highness personally. About one thing recently… well, it was something like a childish burst of anger. If it’s not too late now, I apologize. That was inexcusable.”

Quickly bowing his face deeply, Ikta released the princess’s hand, and said, “I’ll come back with Haro,” as he returned to the cave. While watching his back with a dazed face, the princess looked at

the index finger of her right hand, conscious of the feeling of the dried lips that were held there for a brief time.

“...Yatori. Ikta Solork, in the end, what kind of man is he…?”

At the question of Her Highness, Chamille, Yatori, after thinking for a long time, answered clearly despite making a sarcastic laugh.

“He is a twisted man. ...However, Your Highness- you can’t build a house with only straight sticks.”

After Her Highness, Chamille, and Yatori return to the cave. With the sound of shoes treading on moist earth echoing in the darkness, Ikta unexpectedly wandered back in front of the dead bodies quietly laying down.

“--Sorry about this. Even as far as offerings go, this is all I have.”

Saying that, he lined up smoked boar meat and caju flesh in front of the corpses. When that was over, he had Kusu turn on a Lantern near the resting Kioka soldiers and went around looking at each of their tags.

“Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare, Private Irik Bahuzah of Aerial Warfare, Sergeant Hadiakka Ogholee. I’ll be sure to remember your names. ...Nnn, I guess Irik was relatively handsome. That wasn’t nice of us.”

Staring at his face, which had been unrecognizably destroyed by a bullet, Ikta gave a light sigh. While staring at the profile of his face, Kusu inserted some words.

“It was a justified act of self-defense. Ikta, please don’t be disheartened.”

“Thanks, Kusu. Of course it was a justified action. Maybe, for them as well.”

For a long time after that, Ikta was quiet, gazing at the corpses. Since they knew that they, without saving the souls of the dead, were only comforting their own hearts.

Before long, the night sky began growing light, and Ikta, not speaking a word the whole time, turned his heel and returned to the cave. In the end, he couldn’t come out with the words of eulogy he had been mulling over the whole time from the beginning to end.

On the next day, which he greeted while sleep-deprived, Ikta brought all of his allies to the beach along the center of the tropical forest. After they walked for nearly an hour, when they were sweating under their clothes, they finally reached their targeted location.

“That’s it. If we’re here, we can’t be seen from the border, and even if we go out onto the sand, I don’t think there’s a problem. Urged on by Ikta, they left from inside the forest and went under the sun for first time in a while, widening their eyes at the large silhouette that was there.

A dome[25] inflated into a bulging sphere, and a small basket meant for installed under it meant for a

crew. The shape they saw from up close was much larger than it was rumored to be, and, if things didn't go well, it would look more like a monster than a mode of transportation.

"Waah- so this is a blimp...?"

Haro, her eyes sparkling with curiosity, quickly drew closer.

Ikta gave a warning to Yatori, Torway, and Matthew, the three people chasing after her.

"Hey, there's a ban on fire near the blimp. Shia ought to know, so I think it's fine, but make sure you don't raise sparks by striking your swords or air shooters together."

They didn appear to understand the reason for the "ban on fire", but in any case, becoming cautious, they stopped halfway to the blimp. Peering into the basket, Haro tilted her head at what was inside.

"Is that a fire spirit? That one and the three others whose souls fell out…"

"Ahh. When we came for a preliminary inspection before dawn, since it was blimp-sitting, we disconnected its soul stone and made it into our prisoner. We were nervous because we thought its human partner might be nearby, but it didn't seem that was possibly given what Ikta said…"

"Aside from the crew and this spirit, three more fire spirits are required for one blimp, my buddy Matthew."

There were some who turned a surprised look toward Ikta, who gave a plausible explanation, and others, a doubtful one.

"The way you said that, Ik-kun, do you possibly know the mechanics of a blimp...?"

"Amazing- where did you learn that!? It's certainly not made with the Church of Alderah's-- ah-"

Remembering that Her Highness, the Princess, was right nearby, Haro panicked and shut her mouth. The person herself made a display of shaking her head with an innocent face.

"I'm not a priest, and it's currently a time of emergency concerning all of our lives. As long as you don't go too far, you may disregard the principles of the Church of Alderah. If need be, please devote your very best."

"Even Her Highness is saying this, so, Ikta, don't hold back and tell us. ...In the first place, how does something like a blimp float in the sky? Is it because it's inflated and bulging with air? If that's it, then don't frogs or pufferfish also seem like they could fly?"

When Matthew argued his naive speculations, Ikta nodded sleepily while scratching his head.

"If you're set on that I have no choice then- I'll explain the mechanics simply. ...Answer this first, my buddy Matthew. Have you ever gone swimming in the ocean?"

“Sure I have. I'm not bad with movement either.”

“I know, being able to move relatively quickly considering your physique is one of your strong points. Now that we've established that, whenever you swim, how does your body float on the water? Is there some kind of trick?”

“A trick... if it's just floating, I guess that would be not uselessly adding energy, and holding plenty of air in your chest.”

“That's right, if you hold air in water, you're able to float aren't you? That reason is simple, because air is way lighter than water. ‘’Bubbles’’ you spit out from your mouth inside the water go straight to the water's surface, no? The mechanism of a blimp floating in the sky is exactly the same. Essentially, you're just doing this in the air.”

“In the air...? But, the stuff that's inflating the blimp is air, isn't it?”

“That's true, but there are many kinds of air, Matthew. Hmm, shall we change our comparison a bit? --Then, Haro, haven't you felt cooler when you lie down on a hot day?”

“Ah...yes, I have. I often took afternoon naps together with my younger brothers.”

"Thanks for that heartwarming episode. That's right, You're cooler when you're sleeping than when you're standing because hot air naturally rises to the top, and reversely cool air stops at the bottom. So, I want you to relax your minds and think about that just a bit-- if I were to say it differently, doesn't it mean that ‘’hot air is lighter than cool air’’?"

The first things after those words, as if something clicked in his mind, Torway clapped his hands together.

“--I see, I got it, Ik-kun! In other words, the air inside the dome, or blimp, is warmed by the flames of a fire spirit, making the entirety of the fuselage lighter than the air outside and it floats!”

The young man answering gleefully, but Ikta turned his thumb downward while sticking out his tongue

“Bzzt! Sorry about that triumphant face, but you're wrong, Ikemen. Well, it can fly with that in theory though. However, the practical problem is whether fire spirits could create fire endlessly- eventually they'll run out of fire, and on the day they load the fuel, it'll be too heavy and it won't be able to float. The hot air balloon you're talking about is transportation of the imagination for now. Hey! You got that?”

“When you're talking to Torway, your attitude becomes pretty outspoken, doesn't it...? It's fine, so tell us the right answer without being mean.”

Ikta, admonished by a stunned-faced Yatori, nodded slightly and turned toward her.

“O~kay. Since Shia is also here, this will quicker with a stage show. Let's see... does anybody have a silk handkerchief or something? It'd be better if it's as thin and fine-textured as possible though.”

Ikta didn't miss the movements of Her Highness, the Princess, who immediately clutched her pocket the moment he called out.

“Oh, Princess. It appears that you have something that fits the description.”

“Y-you can't have this! Find something else!”

“You're pretty cruel, aren't you? Even though earlier you just said, 'If need be, devote your very best.'”

The princess, prodded in a painful place, stopped her words of rejection. Ikta had already come to know how to deal with her. As part of the Imperial Family, it was the rare strength of her sense of responsibility that was Her Highness, Chamille's virtue as well as her weakness.

“Although, for working out a plan for this point forward, it's a very important explanation... You won't let me have it no matter what?”

Being asked again in that manner, the princess, feeling that she had an obligation, couldn't continue shaking her head horizontally. Ikta took the handkerchief which the young girl removed from her pocket with quivering hand using an affected carefulness.

“I am grateful for your kindness. ..Ahh, this is good fabric. I'll be back after I soak it a bit.”

When he confirmed that the thing met his requirements, Ikta ran to the water's edge and dipped the handkerchief in seawater. Bringing that back without wringing the moisture, and wrapped the right hand of the fire spirit Shia whom Yatori was hugging, with the dripping cloth.

“Haro, let Shia drink some water from Miru's 'water spout' for me. Yatori, you remember this, don't you?”

“Yes. I placed my hands directly above his 'fire chamber', didn't I?”

When Shia drank up about a bowlful of water, while layering her own palm on his right hand, Yatori gave an order.

“Shia, light a fire in your right hand. One minute is fine.”

Shia shook his head horizontally and refused her command. It was because he couldn't inflict a burn onto his master.

“You can't light it? That won't work- please do it as much as you are able to.”

When Yatori modified and repeated her order, after a little while, the hissing sound of air escaping from the handkerchief covering Shia's right hand began to be heard. Following that, the handkerchief covering the fire spirit's hand gradually rose with the pressure inside.

“Alright, this looks good.”

Choosing a suitable time, Ikta took a string meant for sewing from his breast pocket and tightly gathered the bottom side of the inflated handkerchief with it. Doing that, he then unfastened the small cloth dome trapping gas inside from Shia's hand and showed it to everyone.

“Please watch carefully, since it's only for a moment. --and, go!”

Ikta released his hand at a low position, and the inflated handkerchief, not yielding to gravity, to the contrary somehow rose to the sky. As surprised voices rose, he caught the handkerchief which was escaping toward the sky with both hands.

“A floating gas blimp dependent on the light air that fire spirits produce when they drink water such as when I did that trick earlier-- better known as 'rising air'. That's the principle behind the Kioka Republic's blimp. Incidentally, when you light 'rising air' on fire, it explodes while burning. That's a type of fire called 'spit fire' which you learn about in the Alderah Theology Spirit Department. Imperial citizens do nothing but look at the phenomenon called 'fire', but they should also turn to the gas that acts as its source, no?”

Torway's nicely shaped eyebrows rose greatly at the impact of the thing that occurred in front of his eyes.

“That's amazing, Ik-kun.... I knew about 'spit fire' as well, but I didn't hear anything except that it was useless fire that didn't nothing but explode fiercely. To think that it had such a ground-breaking function...”

“That's because 'rising air' displays its real worth when you use it in large amounts. Normally, it's difficult to use even if you burn it.”

“That's so weird... Why don't they talk about 'rising air' in class even though they teach about 'spit fire?' Is that because the construction of a blimp is prohibited?”

Yatori gently answered Matthew's question, which was full of discontent.

“You reversed the cause and effect, Matthew. It's because rising air can only be obtained in this manner that the Church of Alderah prohibited the construction of blimps. Though I think that you understand since you saw the trick earlier- this time ‘I had Shia produce ‘’something I normally wouldn't be able to have him produce’’.”

“--Huh? He wouldn't make that for you normally?”

“Of course not. Even if I order something like, 'produce rising air' or 'produce the source of spit fire', a fire spirit would never produce the same thing. This thing called 'rising air' is no more than a byproduct of Shia's[26] efforts to not burn me[27] if he can help it and somehow try to produce 'spit fire.'”

“...I see. In a way, you can't obtain it without 'deceiving your spirit.' I don't understand it. Considering that having a human obtain this is not the true intent for a spirit nor for the Supreme God, it might be a

reasonable argument from the standpoint of the Church of Alderah which guides everyone..."

"Although, concerning the prohibition of blimps, there's also the separate reason of engaging in 'insolent behavior such as rising in the sky with a human body, or trying to draw closer to the Supreme God of the Heavens without acknowledging one's rightful place.' Well, whatever the case--"

"It's similarly 'unscientific,' as you said it, Solork."

Her Highness, Chamille, pouting her lips, took her next lines early. While shrugging his shoulders, Ikta untied the string binding the borrowed handkerchief as if he just remembered.

"No no, I wouldn't think those disrespectful things even in a dream."

Her Highness, the Princess, snatched the handkerchief, which Ikta innocently tried to touch to his forehead, with a desperate expression. When she remembered what she had used that for last night, she was about to emit flames from her face by just having it held by someone else.

While turning a completely unrestrained smile toward the princess- who was making threats- Ikta resumed his speech.

"Well then, we got slightly off topic. Since my point was how to use this blimp."

"Can't we all ride it and cross the border? It's cramped, but if we somehow force ourselves..."

"Quite the challenger, my buddy Matthew. However, sorry to say, but the limit on passengers is three people. Well, Her Highness, Chamille, is small, and if the three girls and skinny old me board together, we might be able to just barely go with four people. Though on the contrary, if Matthew and Torway board, it'll be at full capacity just with that."

"In addition, wind direction is a problem, isn't it? Since the blimp doesn't have its own propulsion, movement is entirely dependent on the wind. The same as a sailboat, in order to read and catch the wind, skill and familiarity with the terrain should be necessary. The Kioka Aerial Warfare soldiers who have practiced here are the only ones who can do that. We can't compensate for knowledge and experience."

Yatori contributed, and Matthew and Haro moaned with sullen faces. It was a rather difficult problem. The blimp left behind by the Kioka soldiers didn't seem to be enough of a 'gift from providence' for them to be calm.

However, Ikta then shook his head in a surprisingly light manner.

"No, it's nothing to be so disappointed about. Since, fortunately, plenty of gas[28] is left inside the dome. Once we have Shia refill it a little bit and release the ballast[29], we can at least float the blimp."

"But what are you going to do once you're floating...? If we can't advanced in our desired direction, then, then it's meaningless..."

Ikta turned a seemingly mean-spirited smile towards Her Highness, the Princess, who was gathering wrinkles on her forehead.

“Princess, in times like these you change your perspective. If we can't use it as transportation, then we should think of another way to use it. It's like a lady's dress being tailored so it's one size fits all.”

Haro and Matthew tilted their heads sideways, and Torway was the fastest to guess at Ikta's intention.

“I see... This blimp itself can be material for a trade with the Kioka Army?”

“This time you're correct, Ikemen. The blimp, made into something that determines superiority in this war, has a high the cost of manufacture, and for the Kioka Army, each and every aircraft is a precious treasure. They won't let go of one so easily. Of course, I don't expect that it would equal something like the bodies of six mere refugees”

“So it's an unconventional hostage. ...But, there's still a problem. How do you plan to get our opponents to the negotiation table? Even if you threaten them with something like, 'if you don't accept our commands we break it,' blimps, unlike humans, won't walk. There's no way we can cross the border while holding an air shooter at its back and return it when we arrive to the other side."

"That's right. The Kioka Army might wary of us for trying to trade a blimp to cross over to the Empire's side. How ever you look at it, since it's simply not refugee behavior, we'll inevitably be suspected as spies. It should probably be a negotiation involving the commander of the border guards. If he sees through my identity in that time- even if they lose a single blimp- we might be the ones presenting a rather valuable hostage from our side instead..."

However, Ikta's smile didn't waver even slightly at Yatori’s and Her Highness, the Princess’s objections.

"That might happen if negotiations are dragged on. ... But, I don't intend on having them involve their higher ups. I'm aiming for lower class officers like the squad leader or platoon commander. I also plan to prepare some cheap tricks on our side so they aren't able to exercise their own judgment."

His allies' gazes silently asked about the “scheme”. Ikta stuck his hand in his pant pocket, and took out the tag he stripped from the unlucky Kioka soldier from the previous night's battle.

"First, since Kioka Army uniforms are a dark green color, if we wash out the blood stains, they'll be unnoticeable. Second, the deceased owner of this tag isn't that different from me in both age and physique. And third- I think Yatori already knows this though, speaking of the trademark gag when I entertain women, 'A Kioka Citizen when he's ~ ' series is definitely happening."

Everyone's eyes gradually took on the color of understanding. Ikta watched that until he was satisfied, then spoke.

"I wonder. Unless that kind of performance succeeds with someone from this group, I don't want to hear that there aren't enough people.”

Entrusted with the position of commanding the 67th Platoon of the Kioka Army Western Border Defense Unit along the shore, Second Lieutenant Jif Halrum wasn't exactly a great commander gifted with talent, but there was an established reputation in the reliability of her work ethic. Her sense of duty, understanding her position as a non-commissioned officer and completing the task she was given to neither deficiency nor excess, was valued by her superior officers.

Guarding the border required patience. And yet- because the opportunity to perform a brilliant deed or service was close to non-existent- it was all the more a task which talented or ambitious people weren't inclined to take. All day long, while continuing to exchange glares with the Imperial Army that set up camp on the opposite side of the border, there was also a need for them to direct their awareness to the ocean so they couldn't go around by boat.

Well, they ended with just sending the “no abnormalities” light signal to their superior officer usually three times a day. They gave as much food as they could to the refugees who crossed the border, then on a weekly basis, they assisted in sending them to the village on the rear side. It was a cause for annoyance that their numbers were increasing by the day.

"The time is sunset. Private Romari of Correspondence requests a report from the Squad Commander."

Even when they gave orders to the Correspondence soldiers, they didn't need to mention each and every detail. Nothing happened today that merited a report. Their stage partners were also fully aware of this.

"Goodness, so today also dawned and twilit without a thing..."

It seems that he's forgotten that it's war time- thought Nejif while watching her inferior leave. The reason being, the Empire hadn't conducted a large-scale invasion on the Republic even once since the start of the war. As a result of the Aerial Warfare Division's activity, the progression the war consistently and one-sidedly shifted in their favor. As personnel who were set aside as preparation for attack, Nejif and the others’ job was practically no different than if they were in peacetime conditions.

“If it'll be like this until the end, it's nice that we'll end without our allies dying, but... does the Empire have no intention of waging war seriously?”

It was obvious to Nejif. For the Empire, which didn't have a way to readily counter the Aerial Warfare soldiers, attacking was the only way to begin their efforts in this war. Even though they'd only exhaust themselves even if they continue their defense, why didn't they implement that....? Even though it was something even a child would understand- despite being their enemy, he was getting frustrated.

“Second Lieutenant, there are friendly troops from the rear side!”

The things which one low grade officer worried about- her futile meditations- were cut off by the

update of her subordinate officer rushing to the tent. While thinking about whether she had an appointment for a visit of some sort, Nejif rose from her chair.

“Isn't this sudden? Which unit are they? We don't have the preparations to greet them, but-”

“Their affiliation is unclear, but they're a small number. However, even from a distance, it's a strange line-up...”

There was perplexity on her subordinate's face. Nejif, deciding for now to see for herself, exited the tent.

The unscheduled friendly troops were coming closer one by one to a distance where she could discern their faces. There was one Republic soldier, two males- one plump and the other tall- dressed in lightly dirtied clothing, and furthermore three female children.

“...A refugee delivery?”

It was common for soldiers assigned to the patrolling mission to find and capture refugees, then bring those persons to the Border Defense Unit. Although it was a rare case that the refugees numbered even greater than the soldiers.

“--Stop there! Soldier in the front, reveal your affiliated unit and full name!”

Determining that her visitors had come to a distance to which her voice would carry, Nejif commanded them in a loud voice. Hearing that, the solider straightened his spine and bowed, then began speaking at a rapid pace from which one could sense slight panic.

“I am a member of the Seventh Independent Battalion of the Republic Army, aboard Patrol Craft 24, Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare! I apologize for not making arrangements, but I'd like to ask for an audience with your commander as soon as possible!”

“Aerial Warfare Solider Nihad? I am Second Liutenant Nejif Halrum, commanding the 67th Platoon of the Kioka Army Western Border Defense Unit, but what are you in such a hurry about? First, if you're on a patrolling mission, you're supposed to move in groups of three per squad. What happened to the remaining two?”

When the reply came back immediately, the young soldier who introduced himself as Nihad- an Ikta Solork in disguise- showed a paled face that didn't seem like an act at all.

“There was a situation and they aren't here. Anyway, since there is no time, I shall give a brief explanation. --Please look to the eastern sky. Do you see that a blimp is floating there?”

Hearing that, Nejif also noticed the round silhouette floating in the sunset sky. Since it wasn't strange for blimps to fly to the vicinity of the border from the rear side, she hadn't been particularly aware of it until now, but....

“It's flying at a pretty low altitude, isn't it? What is is doing? And once the sun sets, landing will

become pretty difficult too...”

“Even if wants to land, it isn't able to. The ones aboard that blimp right now aren't my partners. They are the allies of these people.”

Nihad motioned toward the people he brought along. Nejif lifted her eyebrows without thinking.

“...What did you say?”

“These people are refugees who came from the Empire. On the day of the storm from before. It seems that they drifted to the Republic in a small boat. Assigned on a patrolling mission, we landed in this vicinity temporarily since night was approaching, but we came across these people in the forest along the shore.”

“Hmm... Then?”

“From there the story gets complicated.... The moment we encountered them, when we fired one shot from an air shooter to intimidate them, the startled bunch began to flee all at once. Chasing after them, we were able to capture one each, but unfortunately, the direction they escaped to was the location where we left the blimp, and...”

He appeared to have fallen silent from shame, and Nejif guessed the entire situation.

“...It was stolen! You suffered an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the refugees, and lost the Republic Army's precious blimp!”

“I don't have any excuses. I wouldn't have any objections to being torn limb from limb in the Public Court for this.”

In the opening when the emotion of surprise outweighed that of suspicion inside Nejif, Ikta casually mixed in his cheap tricks.

The “Public Court” was the popular name for the Kioka Republic's Judicial Branch, and it allowed the attendance of ordinary citizens to preserve the impartiality of the arrangements. So to speak, it was “a place where people's sins are openly judged as the public- sovereign in the nation- watches attentively,” but on the other hand, the citizens of the republic- especially government officials and soldiers, positions that receive salary from taxes, follow the cliche where they reflect and contemplate their own lives.

In the monarchical Katjvarna Empire, the phrase for dealing with this would be “before His Majesty, the Emperor without even a defense,” or “humbly reporting a failure in a court of martial law”. It was a small difference that gave rise to the variations between the systems of government and the characteristics of their citizens, but if not for this minor part, the humans would regard their stage partners as compatriots.

“...But, Nejif-dono. Before that, won't you please help lighten my crime?”

“Even if I wanted to, we must have that blimp returned to us no matter what!”

“That is why I'd like to receive your help. One of the refugees who stole that blimp, in the short time as they broke from the ground and floated high into the sky, thrust a deal at us.”

“A deal...? Just what were the details?”

“It was, 'give my family and allies plenty of food, and see them to Empire under the pretense of returning prisoners of war. Once I see that their six figures have crossed the border half-way, I'll lower the blimp.'”

Nejif's expression distorted with annoyance, and her mouth spit out unproductive words.

“Ridiculous, I thought they're people who abandoned their native land. Do they think that the Empire is now still warmly welcome those who abandoned it and came running back? Surrendering to us and becoming citizens of the Republic is the wiser choice by far.”

“That's what I think too, but there's no persuading the people themselves of that now. On the other side of that, since they already terrorized us and stole our blimp, they should be in a state of mind where they won't respond to our attempts. When we first met them, if we had received them peacefully without intimidating them, then it might be a different story, but...”

That's exactly right- Nejif seemed about to yell. No matter if they were refugees who abandoned the Empire, their hearts were probably wavering in the space between their native land and this new one. If a gun or something was suddenly fired in the middle off that, it's not impossible that they would end up thinking that Kioka had no intention of receiving them.

“Even though an order to give refugees a warm reception was handed down, you did a pretty thoughtless thing.... No, I won't start to blame only you, Aerial Warfare soldier Nihad. More importantly, what about the other two? In the formation of the Aerial Warfare Division, wasn't a sergeant supposed to be included?”

It was logic that the highest ranked person would come to meet him- Nejif was implicitly reproaching him. Under a false panicked expression, Ikta was actually nervous. Because whether or not he could manipulate this part would decide the success or failure of the scheme.

“There were circumstances for that.... My allies are taking different route than I am, and they are now directly under the blimp. The ones currently aboard it are amateurs, so it isn't impossible that some time for whatever reason they won't sink to the ground, or even ride the wind and be carried off to the side of the Empire. We had to leave some hands to secure or destroy the fuselage when that happens. At the minimum, two people are require to secure it, and when it comes to the decision of destroying it, the one entrusted with the heavy responsibility of that decision, no one but the squad leader...”

Nejif was at a loss for reproaching words. Certainly, if it amounted to handing it over to enemy hands, they had to destroy it. Perhaps because there wasn't much gas inside because it was stolen immediately following landing, the blimp was even now just barely drifting within range of an air

shooter. If that was the case, then it perhaps it might be possible to shoot it down.

However, since it was a blimp, shooting it down with an air shooter came with the possibility of disaster- the blimp popping and scattering- which they couldn't ignore. If that happened, the deaths of those onboard were certain, and the Kioka soldiers would also have lost a precious blimp in its entirety. They had to avoid that as far as they could. It was now that Nejif understood what he himself was aiming for.

“Don't tell me, Private Nihad... Do you plan to give in to the threats and have the refugees cross over to the side of the Empire? No, the fact of the matter is that you're referring that accommodation to me?”

“I'm ashamed, but as you guessed...”

“Ridiculous- as if I can engage in that kind of conduct by own discretion! In the first place, I don't have the authority! My mission is to get rid of people trying to cross the border without permission- I can't ferry people who're already on the inside the border to the opposite shore!”

“I am aware of that, but please consider it carefully. The ones who'll be blamed for the failure aren't restricted to only us. These refugees came here by crossing the ocean under Lieutenant Nejif's jurisdiction.”

At those words, Nejif opened her eyes wide with shock. ...That was right. She had done nothing but criticize him, but when she saw it from this perspective, wasn't it also her own error? Even being ordered to receive refugees warmly didn't mean one should let them pass through the border without stopping them. Of course, to urge a citizen of the Empire to flee, they had intentionally created several gaps in defense on the border line. But, these people hadn't crossed through those.

Ikta saw that Nejif's heart, wavering between responsibility and self-preservation, was in his hand. As someone with a strong sense of responsibility, she wasn't running to simple solution of self-preservation, but nonetheless, Nejif did possess that kind of character.

But, the youth discerned it. According to the art of war- one must create an escape route for an enemy driven to the wall.

“...Lieutenant Nejif. If I express my own thoughts, we ought to make taking back the blimp our higher priority. The crime of sending back refugees, the crime of losing a blimp. When it comes to that, the one Lieutenant should choose is the one that results in smaller losses for the Republic, right?”

Ikta's crafty side lay in having the achievement of self-preservation and of responsibility coexist. He let her digest that the deportation of refugees, or abusing one's authority, was a small vice for the great affair of taking back the blimp. That self-preservation just happened to be nothing more than a consequence of that. To make a steadfast character shift, this kind of set up was effective.

“...I-I can't make the decision by myself. I'll contact the company commander via light signal, so for now just...”

“Please stop the jokes! Relaying these circumstances by light signal would require too much effort, and do you think that that blimp will stay in Kioka skies until you finish speaking with your superior!? If you'll let me speak as a person lined up as the lowest of Aerial Warfare soldiers, the possibility that the wind in the upper sky will begin blowing toward the ocean from now is strong. If that happens, since the blimp might descend far into the open ocean, we will have no choice but to shoot it down. At any rate, a precious armament will be lost from our hands!”

Of course, Ikta had no intention of either letting her dial her superior nor thoroughly think it over. This scheme, if one was calm, had several holes to be found. More important than anything was to steal her time for making a decision. He had to make her believe that the plan he proposed was “the only thing they could do.”

“O-once we lead these people, is there a guarantee that that blimp will come down!? From the perspective of those on board, isn't that simply returning in the middle of their enemies a suicide mission?!”

“No, they'll definitely come down. ...Lieutenant, have you ever been aboard a blimp?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Then you probably don't know. How lonely it is boarding that and floating in the sky. People by nature are creatures that live with their feet planted on the ground. Defying that and taking to the sky requires immense courage. During training, even I was seized with the feeling that my body was paralyzed. At that time there was only one thing I could think of... I want to return to the ground, even one second earlier- only that. There was no room to care about anything else.”

“B-but aren't they actually doing that and enduring it right now?!”

“If the lives of family and friends are in the balance, even fear might be lost in desperation. But the very moment the tensioned string is cut, they will realize it- the fact that they are in the sky with no one to turn to.”

The reasoning that Ikta used for persuasion was, of course, plain improvisation, but for Nejif who had heard it, it echoed weightily as an experience which only 'someone who knows the sky' could speak of. Even the five people impersonating refugees and spying on the situation could help but be amazed by his acting ability.

Authority disappeared from Nejif's objection. With that, Ikta knew that he'd overcome the difficult part of the negotiation.

“...Even if we bring these people to the side of the Empire, it's evening. Can they see that from the blimp?”

“I don't know. But it's actually more convenient under thicker darkness, and there's a light spirit holder among them. Once we've crossed halfway to the border, if we send out an Imperial style light signal, communication with the blimp could be possible. That is to say, someone to make them send it

is necessary. I should hold my air gun and follow them.”

As though it were an obvious responsibility, Ikta suggest that he accompany the refugees crossing the border. Since it was a spontaneous idea in terms of the flow of the conversation until now, Nejif didn't feel that it was particularly out of place.

“I understand what you're saying. I understand, but...”

But the anxiety remaining inside Nejif was the final obstacle preventing her from shaking her head vertically. As the commander of the Border Defense Unit, the risk involved with letting people whose identities she didn't know come in and out of the border made her uneasy.

“I understand how you feel. However, please look carefully, Second Lieutenant Nejif. Do these people look like spies or manufacturing soldiers?”

With that said, Nejif carefully reexamined the people to whom Ikta had pointed. Young people who probably weren't mature adults. Three of them were girls. No matter how incompetent the Imperial Army was, it was impossible for a Unit that risked their lives and infiltrated enemy lands to have this kind of composition.

“If it's going to bother you no matter what, then all you need to do is inspect their belongings right? We don't have the leeway to interrogate them one by one, but I think that we might have time for that.”

Those words became the final push. Nejif gathered creases on her forehead and after about a minute of silence, turned to her inferiors who had collected around herself for something or other, and finally sent out orders with a bitter expression.

“Search these people's belongings. Hurry!”

Five minutes after that, the inspection of belongings ended without a hitch, and the six of them, including Ikta, assembled and crossed over the border. Second Lieutenant Nejif's soldiers were directing vigilant eyes toward their backs, but the distance between them was already quite far.

“Well, that went better than I expected. Thanks everyone, I’m accepting applause and cash donations, you know.”

Supposedly keeping watch, Ikta, impersonating the Republic Army's Private Nihad Hyu of Aerial Warfare, cracked a joke for the first time in a while as he pointed an air gun- of course, one taken from the Kioka soldier- toward the backs of his allies from the end of their line. Yatori gave a small snort from the vanguard.

“That was quite the scheme. To actually float an unmanned balloon and use it for coercion. It was hard to tell from here, but there was no one aboard the blimp in question. All they did was load a bit of their things onto it. Ikta for both negotiation and persuasion had invented an impossible imaginary terrorist, and thus tricked Second Lieutenant Nejif completely.”

“What Kioka soldiers fear more than anything is losing a blimp. I thought that if we used that as a base, this method of threatening would serve our purpose well enough without even having to point a gun.”

“By setting up an imaginary terrorist, you turned Second Lieutenant Nejif's focus away from us, didn't you? Just what'd expect, Ik-kun. I think that if this were a face-to-face dealing, the other party does have her reputation as a commander, and we might not have been able to pass through.”

Torway directed a reverent gaze toward Ikta. In front of him, Haro also nodded moment by moment.

“I feel the same. Since it was in the form of 'advice from a friendly soldier,' it was also easier for her to comply with.... And in addition to that your acting ability! I'll bet Second Lieutenant-san from the other side probably didn't suspect Ikta's words until the end. Really, I didn't think that you actually could speak so fluently with a Kioka accent.”

Ikta, praised by his allies, was triumphantly lifting nose up. The only person among them with a sullen expression was Matthew.

“Hmmph- I'm not just gonna shower you with praise. Since I'd just gotten used to that air gun, you see...”

“My buddy Matthew, please just forgive me for that. If you'd been holding an Imperial style air gun or sabre sword, then you wouldn't seem like perfectly harmless refugees, right? It's because we let go of them that we were able to get through the item inspection.”

As those words indicated, Yatori, Torway, Matthew- not a single one of the weapons those three had carried on their bodies remained. Even the ones they'd taken from the sinking ship. Yatori and Torway just didn't say it, but they also held those dear in their hearts.

“Matthew, rather than sighing over the things you lost, show some appreciation for the life you were able to keep. Also, it's not as if we've thrown our weapons away. Although, we did leave up to fate whether or not they'll come back.”

Yatori nonchalantly smoothed things over. In short, those were the things which they'd loaded on the unmanned blimp. Though it was a small consolation, they were gambling on the possibility that the blimp would drift to the side of the Empire with the direction of the wind.

“It seems like we've reached the buffer zone. Well then, Kusu, would you send a signal of surrender to the side of the Empire for me?”

Hearing that from Ikta, Kusu, who was inside the pouch on Matthew's hip, jumped down to the ground. Since it was necessary for Ikta to transform into Nihad during the negotiations, the two of them temporarily switched spirits with the other. Of course, since one couldn't give orders to a spirit one hadn't contracted with, the air shooter which Ikta was aiming before was no different from papier mache.

While Kusu sent the light signal, Ikta suddenly remembered something, and unfastened the air shooter

barrel from the torso of the wind spirit Tsuu, whom he'd borrowed from Matthew. From his 'wind tunnel,' Ikta took out a small ring which he'd hidden inside.

“Princess, I return this to you. But please don't drop it. From here on, that's our proof of ID.”

The ring engraved with the seal of the Empire was turned over to owner from Ikta. Speaking of Her Highness, the Princess, both her clothing and skin were covered in dust, similar to the rest of the actors. However, so her beauty wouldn't stand out, they'd smeared mud on her proud, blonde hair. Ikta was also in a seemingly tragic state, but strangely, the person herself, not especially giving an answer, only stared at the youth motionlessly with her two large eyes.

“...? Is there something on my face?”

“...No. Aside from your nose, eyes, and mouth, nothing.”

While giving a meaningless response, the princess didn't avert her eyes from him. When Ikta tilted his head, Haro, who was standing next to Kusu, yelled in a loud voice.

“Ahh- Soldiers from the Empire are here! W-we won't be shot right!?”

“As we barely escape enemy territory with our lives, we are shot by friendly troops and perish... That's really not funny, you know.”

Everyone felt a chill down their spine at that image, but fortunately that turned out to be paranoia. The seal of the Empire, which Her Highness, Chamille, showed the soldiers proved tremendously more effective than they'd imagined.

When the ring was confirmed authentic by the high grade military officers assigned to Border Defense, the six of them were carried inside Imperial territory with excessive ceremony. This was their escape from the hell into which they'd descended but for a paper-thin difference.



For the Katjvanmaninik Dynasty, ever since the administration attained unity, the sunlight beating down on the country did not face a decline. Its inhabitants with light clothing and travelers with turbans wrapped around their faces, each resisting the fury of the sun.

However, people weren't constantly being overwhelmed by heatstroke. The marketplace was lively under the lord of fire, and food and clothing, ornaments with precious stones and metals, and furthermore foreign goods which no one had seen before had the store fronts on the street overflowing with activity.

The heart of the Katjvarna Empire's business, politics, and culture, the capital Banhataal. The capital, the grounds in the territory of the Emperor which celebrated his prosperity. In this metropolis, the palace where the Imperial Family resided existed together with the garden of a magnificent evergreen tree.

“Ikta, Wake up! Information arrived about the state of the Eastern Province, you know!”

On the third floor of a leading high class hotel even within that capital, "the White Gold Sand Dune," Yatorishino Igsem was banging on the door of a private room. The time was past 11AM. For the fiery-haired girl with the absolute habit of sleeping and waking early, there was no reason to let be the person still out like a light at this hour.

As she continued banging on the door without even caring that there was no response, suddenly a rich sound of an open palm striking a cheek with all its strength echoed back. In front of Yatori's blankly staring eyes, the door was finally thrown open. The one there wasn't a sleepy-eyed youth, but an exquisite woman with her clothing in meaningful disarray.

“G-good morning, miss. ...So, umm, that was rude of me, wasn't it...?”

While fastening her loosened collar with both hands, the woman slipped out from beside the girl and left down the hallway. Yatori, watching her receding figure with a sidelong glance, stepped into the room while breathing a heavy sigh.

“How many does that make now? It hasn't even been a month since we came here- there's a limit to your enthusiasm right?”

When Yatori, making a sarcastic remark, finally reached the bedroom and drew the curtains, Ikta was lying half naked on the bed with freshly wrinkled sheets. If it was just that, then one would assume that it was immediately 'after the fact,' but there was a bright red hand print left on his cheek. It was a difficult call to make.

The youth's eyebrows drew together at the unrestrained flow of sunlight from the window.

“...How many you say, so that's not a good thing...? ...It's morning, what time is it now...?”

“It's already noon. You were definitely out drinking yesterday night, weren't you? Out all night with women?”

"I was drinking until dawn, then I was invited to my room, so I starting drinking anew here, and I was sleeping together with her until just earlier. ...When we opened our eyes with your knocking, for some reason she gave me a slap in the face at full power and left. She was completely unreasonable though, since I hadn't even done anything yet... "

Ikta complained from atop the bed. The correct verdict was before-- Yatori shrugged her shoulders and surveyed the room, which reeked of alcohol.

"--Where is Kusu? If he fired a High Beam or something at your sleepy eyes or something-"

Hearing Yatori's voice, Kusu showed himself from a basket- which was a sleeping area for spirits prepared by the hotel- beside the bed. As if immune to the evils of waking from sleep, this one quickly stepped out from the basket and opened his mouth.

"Good morning, Yatori, Shia. I think that Ikta is still sleepy. Since it seems he had women serving as his companions until late last night."

"It's fine, Kusu, that doesn't make much of an excuse. Deal with it and wake up, you sex-obsessed male. ...That woman from before seemed like it, but you wouldn't put your hands on a married woman, are you?"

"Fataaha is a widow, you know... She's also separated from her two children and now is a lonely time for her."

"The art of going after older women is tricky, isn't it? If you're not careful, those children will end up being older than you are. I mean, you take your lady friend's personal statement as at face value? Didn't you see her painful eyes before?"

Without answering, Ikta slowly got off the bed while putting on the shirt folded under his pillow.

"...It's hot today, too. And I really wanted to spend my time in bed until the sun set... Hahhh."

"If you're still half-asleep then read this. It should wake you up more than washing your face with ice water.

Yatori stuck a newspaper extra that was being distributed outside in front of Ikta's face as he gave a large yawn.

"Commander Hazaaf Rikan is dead. --With this, the Eastern Province has fallen completely into the hands of the Kioka Republic."

Even this youth ran short of lighthearted comments and gazed intently at the newspaper in his hand.

Going a little less than a month back in time. Ikta and the others, six of them, having achieved their return to the Empire from the Kioka territory where they'd washed ashore, after entering the care of the soldiers on the border, were carried to a military base in the rear side. There, they were greeted

by the Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Stronghold Hazaaf Rikan himself.

“...You Highness, Princess Chamille! Thank goodness you've come back safely!”

The princess made an appearance at the building of the imperial headquarters, and together with other non-commissioned soldiers, Lieutenant General Rikan immediately knelt down, celebrating the aristocrat's safe return. Rikan was soldier with both a tall stature and broad shoulders, and his luxurious beard and mustache anxiously arranged in a gentleman-like fashion. Even with his body stooped over, he was at the same eye level as Her Tiny Highness, the Princess.

“Raise your head. Surely you have other engagements, Commander-in-Chief, so I'm touched by your personal welcome.”

Her Highness, the Princess, having changed into a clean blouse and skirt, responded to her subject's bow in a stately manner unbecoming of her age. ...Even as a commander who directed 10,000 soldiers, he was no more than another subject in front of this young girl. Who in the world had she brought with her?-- He properly took notice of the five people behind her.

“A ship headed toward the venue of the High Grade Military Officer Exam sunk, and Her Highness, who had been aboard, had gone missing... We were contacted the other day and informed of both those things a few days earlier, but to think that you drifted ashore on Kioka Territory! When I received a message from the border I thought it was impossible.”

“Indeed. Don't consider it anything less than a miracle that I was able to come back in one piece as I am. And that is entirely due to the aid of the five people behind me. I shall introduce my heroes' names to you, Lieutenant General, from my own lips.”

As Her Highness, Chamille, announced their names one by one, Lieutenant General Rikan lost control of his expression.

“So that's what happened... O, brave youths, you did well to escort Her Highness to this point. If you were my subordinates, I would grant you all promotions at once. Without a doubt this is a service of first-class merit.”

They were words of unrestrained praise, but Her Highness's expression suddenly then sank into anguish.

“It would be nice if you really could do that, but.... Because they were entangled in my misfortune, their High Grade Officer Exam was interrupted. I would like for you only to do something for that...”

“Hmm... certainly, the Secondary Exam Continuation has already been carried out. ...And since there isn't any kind of precedent, it's difficult to make a firm promise. But if I relay the circumstances to the administration headquarters, they might make some kind of special accommodations. If it is something Your Highness wishes, I could even have them send it from the front lines with a single stroke of my pen.”

“That would be great. I apologize for adding to the Lieutenant General's work, but...”

“Anything you please. Since to let young talent be buried would be to lose 100 years from our country, right?”

Yatori and Torway silently stopped Haro and Matthew from letting their faces light up in regards to their remaining hopes regarding results of the High Grade Military Officer Exam. Just the one person remaining had to be careful not to appear indifferent, but...

“Well then, Your Highness. With this, I think it might be best if you return to the capital as soon as possible and offer reassurance to His Majesty, the Emperor. Since this is encampment of the front lines, I'm hesitant to call it safe.... Certainly I'm aware of your exhaustion, but if we send out horsemen tonight, you can ride together with your heroes and return.”

Lieutenant General Rikan spoke courteously, though in a tone of voice that didn't allow for refusal. Of course, Her Highness, the Princess, didn't have any objections.

It was decided that the six of them, allowed to spend the time until departure at their leisure as per the Lieutenant General's arrangements, would be guided to an improvised reception room. ...However, as the others began to walk, Ikta Solork alone did not move.

“...? What's the matter, Solork-kun? Possibly do you not feel well...?”

The Lieutenant General took notice of it and came closer, and Ikta then strangely gazed back seriously at his face.

“--You should retreat, Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan.”

“...What?”

“Abandon the Eastern Province, and withdraw all of the remaining troops to the Stronghold. There is no other option at this point.”

Needless to say, Lieutenant General Rikan- all of the officers in that location broke into an uproar at the youth's drastic proposal. The five leaving for the reception room as well were surprised and looked at Ikta.

“...Don't say such odd things. Until we drive away the Republic soldiers, until we achieve our mission as the Eastern Stronghold--”

“The supplies coming from the rear aren't sufficient anymore, are they? Thin cheeks can't be covered up with a beard, you know.”

At that keen remark, Lieutenant General Rikan put a hand to his face and was at a loss for words. Ikta continued further.

“If the officers here have weak color in their faces, the exhaustion of the soldiers must be greater than this, no? I dare say, aren't refugees going one after the other?”

“...”

“There is no way that the land razed by the Aerial Warfare soldiers air raids is supporting the same number of soldiers as it has been up to now. When you delay a decisive defeat indefinitely, you only throw away the lives of soldiers and men in vain. …There is no meaning in this kind of battle. Shouldn't you be the one who understands this best?”

Ikta roughened his voice and pressed the Lieutenant General for an answer. Yatori, unable to stay silent, grabbed the nape of his neck and restrained him.

“Know your place, Ikta! This isn't something you can have an opinion about!”

“Place? Ahh, that's exactly my point, you see—Mr. Lieutenant General can make a move ‘’because he can know his place too well’’. Why must the Eastern Stronghold continue fighting as a stronghold, why didn't we stop devoting ourselves to defending in a war which we can't win without attacking? This, that, everything—‘’It's because it was ordered by the Emperor, isn't it?’’”

The youth screamed. Clearly, that was a statement that trespassed on taboo. Yatori, sensing that he would go too far, had immobilized his shoulder in a double-arm lock and tried to hold him down before, but then an unexpected person landed the final word.

“Yatori, you don't need to stop him. I'll allow it. Let him speak as he pleases.”

With those words from Her Highness, the Princess, came the first time anyone made Yatori doubt her own ears. Katjvarna's Third Imperial Princess, that is, she who is the Emperor's own child, was supposed to be the first one to condemn Ikta's rash outburst.

The moment Yatori- bewildered as she was- released his hand, Ikta lost all caution with using tongue.

“Let's just say it already- this war is a fixed game. It's the result of the Empire, which had wanted to let go of the Eastern Province since quite a long time ago, trying to achieve that in a way so its citizens' criticisms wouldn't be directed against it.”

Her Highness, the Princess, biting her lip and hanging her head as if she was utterly lost- Ikta as he was now didn't even take the slightest notice of that.

“Originally the Eastern Province was unsettled land, a remote territory of Kioka until about 30 years ago when it was taken in an actual war. At that point in time, the Empire simply took pleasure in increasing its territories. However, it committed a massive blunder when it came time to cultivate the land which it had taken such pains to get hold of.”

The Eastern Province was a tougher land for people to live on than the Empire had previously expected. Even taking into consideration that they had to cut down the tropical forests, the flood damages were excessive compared to other areas. In the course of prolonged rainfall, the river overflowed and the roads and crops fields which they'd labored so hard to make ended up being submerged. With that, once sanitary conditions worsened, then diseases became prevalent. Each of the areas outside of the Eastern Province, as regions that were advancing despite fighting against

drought, were yet another factor making the cultivation of the Eastern Province necessary. That wasn't enough for the Empire.

“In comparison to the heavy capital which the Empire invested, the cultivation of the Eastern Province was lagging behind and not advancing. Not only was cultivation a national policy to begin with, it was too late to call back the people who moved there. By the time they took notice, the Eastern Province, far from turning profit, had turned into a land which endlessly exceeded their estimations as a waste of money.

“Of course the Emperor and the Cabinet regretted it: if it this was how it would turn out, then they were better off not having taken it in the first place. ...So, with that someone among them realized it. It's not too late even from now- this burdensome region, wouldn't it be better to return it to Kioka?”

Nonetheless, there was of course no way they could surrender territory to an enemy nation unconditionally. Not only would the citizens not stand for it, more than anything it would be painfully obvious that their intention in doing that was push the internal administration's failure onto another nation.

“Fearing their citizens' criticisms in regards to losing the Eastern Province, the Imperial Family, out of ideas, tried to divert the worst of the anger in a publicity stunt some way or another. The means they had taken for that purpose turned out to be- of all things- a 'lost battle.'

“The scenario was quite straightforward-- for the Kioka Army which came invading, the Eastern Province would be taken back a second time. If this was the case, the citizens' anger would be directed toward an enemy nation and the army's incompetence, and it wouldn't harm the Imperial Family's dignity as much. ...However, it's a backwards method of caring only about appearances, and I'm honestly disgusted by it.”

Spitting those words out, Ikta gazed forcefully at the senior military official in front of him.

“This scenario seeks a sacrifice. Because, proof that 'the Imperial Family and the Cabinet earnestly dealt with the Kioka Army' is necessary. For that purpose, the person attending to the command of the front lines must be a general whose name is well-known. If such a famous general fought life and limb until the bitter end, then even the citizens would accept that defeat was inevitable, wouldn't they?”

“...”

“There is no one more suited for this thankless role than you are, is there, Mr. Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan? You, who received the implicit command of 'lose and die' from the Emperor, in short are the ultimate sacrifice for covering up the internal administration's failure.

Even after receiving such outrageous treatment, you still intend to stay on good behavior and know your place!?”

Ikta roughened his voice and pressed him for an answer, and Lieutenant General Rikan showed a weak, fleeting smile.

“...Solork-kun, I'm really glad that you are not my subordinate. I'd feel guilty for interfering with military regulation to let the youth who took the trouble to concern for my health not be punished...”

“...”

“Of course, I understand what you're saying. However, for a soldier, orders from the higher-ups are absolute. His Highness, the Emperor is the gracious supreme authority for all soldiers within the Empire- meaning, he has the right to absolute power. I must obey his orders. Obeying the orders of superior officers is a requirement for those who make up a military organization.”

“I understand that you, as a commissioned officer, don't want to create a precedent of ignoring orders. ...However, the Emperor is mistaken. Great generals don't spring forth endlessly from the land of the Empire. If he's going to let you die as a scapegoat and not treasure someone as talented as yourself, then do you even think that such a country has a future!?”

“It's not a soldier's job to talk about the future, Solork-kun. That is the role of His Highness, the Emperor. We subjects only know our places and give our very best. For example, well... it's a worst case scenario. Such as assembling a battle formation so that as many soldiers as possible can return without becoming prisoners of war when we lose the fight.”

Ikta clicked his tongue at Lieutenant General Rikan's phrasing, which made him sense that there was a hidden meaning, and looked around the vicinity.

“Ahh, if you're a Lieutenant General, I guess you would make a move of that sort. Since the remaining personnel from the Imperial Headquarters are too few. Really... not only is everyone dressed as a soldier, but you're all putting on tough acts. You're letting all the youths with bright futures quickly run behind and take the rear guard[30] yourself?”

“The Kioka Army will come at us soon on the attack. If we are overpowered by the enemy and can't help pulling back the war front, then that's when we're allowed actual retreat. We'll stop the enemy in their tracks in the East, then we'll force their soldiers in the West fall back... To implement this two-stage operation, inevitably, we'll need to make use of our gradually decreasing forces and divide them further into two groups. If they're not skilled soldiers, then they're unfit for the job.”

“If that's what's happening after their attack begins, then in that case we're better off moving forward with things how they are now! That way, there's no need to carry out that dangerous 2-stage operation. The hardships of the rear guard in keeping the enemy in check will decrease considerably, and as a bonus the Lieutenant General himself will live without being exposed to the brunt of things! Isn't that better in absolutely every way!?”

“I can't do that. Protection of the border is the Eastern Stronghold's assigned duty from His Highness, the Emperor. If we begin retreating before the enemy's attack, then that duty would become something personally renounced by me as the Commander-in-Chief.”

“Go feel guilty about renouncing your duty, but at any rate the Eastern Province will be taken back by Kioka! The outcome is the same!”

“The processes are different. Upholding His Highness's orders and having it taken, and running against His Highness's orders and having it taken.”

Rikan shook his head horizontally. Ikta finally lost his temper at the great general's unending loyalty.

“That's why I'm saying— ‘’this way of thinking is unscientific!’’”

Grabbing the soldier uniform's collar with both hands, Ikta shook the Lieutenant General's body, which was one head taller than his own. At the menacing air one wouldn't imagine from his usual manner, even the five people, Her Highness, the Princess, and the others, looked on at the state of affairs in blank amazement.

When their hands unconsciously flew to their mouths, the color of the soldiers' faces changed as one would expect. However-- one step faster than they could recover, a vital blow volunteered by Yatori rapidly sunk into Ika's side.

“...gah...”

Ikta's knees suddenly gave way at the blow, which had been softened less than usual. His limp fingertips separated from the collar, and Yatori took that opportunity to carry up his body.

“Please excuse him, Lieutenant General Rikan-dono. ...Think of that talk just now as a practical joke and forget it, I beg you.”

Yatori deeply lowered her head along with her long, fiery hair. As if forgetting to even straighten his disheveled coat, Lieutenant General Rikan looked directly at the two youths... at last, he changed his gaze to one of his subordinates.

“...Well, Officer Ordof, please show them to the reception room. With your utmost care.”

Following behind the soldier who'd received the Lieutenant General's order and begun moving, the six of them began walking with Yatori shouldering Ikta at their lead. In the eyes of the older soldiers, Lieutenant General and the others, who were watching them leave, warmth and melancholy were coexisting.

“...Is history going to repeat itself...? Bada Sankrei...”

His five allies, who were close beside him, were the only ones who heard the final words the youth let fall.

“...I see.... Lieutenant General Rikan, is dead...?”

Lying face down with her eyes closed, Haro dedicated a silent prayer. The five of them, summoned by Yatori and gathered in the hotel lobby, shared the news of the death of the great general who should have been valued.

“Meeting the attack of the Kioka Army, the rear guard unit whose command Lieutenant General Rikan saw to personally experienced near total destruction... In exchange, it seems that the majority of the soldiers deployed relatively close to the rear escaped to the capital.”

The Lieutenant General fulfilled his duty to the very end, Torway spoke sorrowfully. Yatori and Matthew also corrected their seated posture and closed their eyes. They prayed wholeheartedly for blissful afterlife of the old soldiers scattered on the battlefield.

Among that group, Ikta, the only one with a sour face, was gently stroking the face of Kusu as he held him to his chest.

“...Damn, didn't I tell him?”

A low mumble twinged with a curse escaped from Ikta's mouth, startling the waitress who was carrying tea. Next to him, Yatori indifferently made a quip while bringing a teacup to her mouth with a flawless movement.

“What, exactly, did you tell him? Aren't you being conceited? Did you think that the state of the war would shift with your one opinion?”

Ikta couldn't return any words. Instead, he poured gritty white powder from the sugar jar furnishing the table, which was distinctive to high class hotels, into his tea.

Haro, having finished her silent prayer and opened her eyes, felt dizzy at his reckless action.

“Th-these grains of sand, would it be bad to pour some in a bag and take them home...? As a souvenir for my younger brothers...?”

She suddenly veered from the solemn news of death to a cheap topic. ...Be that as it may, the other actors, the five people who were officially excellent young men and women, also went on board thinking that it might be less objectionable than having lobby descend into gloom.

“I understand your feelings, but that's bad etiquette, no? Well, the way Ikta's using it might be as well.”

“Even without obsessing over grains of sand, we've also got rewards from the Imperial Family, right? Because at any rate we escorted Her Highness, the Princess, home from an enemy nation.”

Saying that, Matthew completely restored his stomach, which had caved in from being stranded, to its original state with the hotel's luxurious meals. While measuring the passage of time in the course of its swelling, Yatori huffed a sigh.

“Rather than a year's supply of high-grade sugar, there is only one thing I want for my reward. ...A make-up test.”

“Th-that'll be fine, right? It's not our fault the ship sank.”

“It'd be great if things go that smoothly- but the number of successful applicants of the High Grade Military Officer Exam is set for every year. It'd be good if the all seats haven't been filled up already. Arghh, we're already half-dead, you know.”

Maybe her nervousness lessened after living for close to a month in the hotel, but there wasn't as much ambition in Yatori's voice as there had been at the time of the shipwreck.

“No no, I've put quite a lot of thought into it while living here, you see. It's best if they contact us as late as possible.”

While sipping the tea sweetened by adding excessive amounts of sugar, Ikta commented with a voice which wasn't as weary. This man, releasing the scent of women's perfume from his entire body, was unmistakably the one most enjoying their current lifestyle.

“...Speaking of which, it's decided that you're getting a job at the library here[31] ? Traveling expenses are cheaper, was it?”

Considering Ikta had no reason to cut his Exam short, Yatori, shamelessly steadfast, didn't have the slightest intention of scrapping their aforementioned contract. Even so, there was no helping that her voice was tinged with a bit of resentfulness.

“In addition, my living expenses from before entering the lodging house became cheaper, too.”

Ikta spoke, shamelessly brushing it aside. Yatori cursed the naivete of her past self. --She should have punched his stomach harder. If only she had done that, she might have evened it out with medical fees.

As they continued their small talk in a relaxed atmosphere, there was suddenly a presence approaching with a purpose. The four of them save Ikta promptly straightened their backs. The one who came particularly to them with steady footsteps were three imperial court officers clad in imposing formal dress.

“Yatorishino Igsem, Matthew Tetridch, Ikta Solork, Torway Remeon, Haroma Bekkel, The people here are the five people we called now, correct?”

Everyone responded with a nod. The oldest officer cleared his throat with a cough.

“There is an article to be delivered to your residence from the Commander of the Eastern Stronghold, the currently deceased Lieutenant Hazaaf Rikan.”

As he spoke, the younger soldiers lying in wait on both sides of him stepped forth. In their arms, they were carrying a long, thin package wrapped in red cloth. Handling them with care, they placed them on the table and silently opened the wrapping.

“...Ah!? My air shooter!”

Matthew excitedly flew to his beloved gun. A beat later, Torway took in his hands his own air shooter, which was two grades better than the standard, and Yatori calmly in hers her polished saber

and main gauche. Their favorite weapons which they'd accepted might never again return to them. Their arms trembled with the profound weight of iron and time.

“I'll read the message from the Lieutenant. '-Since the blimp fell into the ocean on the side of the Empire, we were fortunately able to recover your belongings. I not only humbly return them to you, I entrust the future of the Empire to you as well, young heroes.'”

All of them straightened their posture and listened attentively. Rather than a message, that was more the contents of a last request.

“'Though I am an old soldier, my will is undying. I pray for all of your continued luck in the fortunes of war from the realm of the dead.' -That is all.”

Without being told by anyone, all of them spontaneously stood up, and bowed to the great commander who was no longer in this world. Even Ikta, the twisted person he was, was not immune to the respect harbored for one who had fulfilled his duty and died a noble death.

“Very well, then let's move to the actual ceremony. A horse-drawn carriage is waiting outside, so please come after leaving your weapons with the hotel. Come adequately prepared with dress that wouldn't be discourteous to the noblemen.”

Light returned to Yatori's eyes. Now, a new wind was beginning to blow, whisking away the blimp that was staggering with no place to go.

“Subjects, please shed thy tears at the privilege of an audience. --His Highness, the Emperor, Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik awaits you at the palace.”

Inside a horse-drawn carriage advancing toward the garden of the magnificent evergreen, each of the five's musings were their own.

“H-hey- Hey, Torway...! If remember correctly when we have the audience, we can't look at His Highness's eyes right? Then it's also impolite to speak directly with him without going through an attendant, and clearing you throat or sneezing is also absolutely forbidden, and then umm... ummm...!”

“Maa-kun, it'll be fine so calm down. When you enter His Highness's presence, kneel down, then after you just need to answer the things he asks you. Since manners for the Imperial Court aren't enforced by law, we won't have anything cruel said to us. That is, we're going there to be praised, right?”

The one trembling and easiest to understand was Matthew, whose round head was frantically turning red and turning blue above his shirt, which had been fastened to the first button against his will. Torway didn't have the time to spend all his energy worrying over calming him down from that kind of state.

“...fine, it's fine... Ilf, Shouka, Echiri... your older sister... you can rely on your older sister, so...”

While muttering the names of her younger brothers, Haro had all but entered the position of prayer. On the opposite side, only Yatori, who was patting her back, was calm as usual. The Igsem Family

had received an imperial visit from His Highness, the Emperor, and in her case, today would not be her first time facing the emperor.

Then Ikta Solork. Since leaving the hotel, he'd decreased the number of words he spoke as if he'd become a different person. But, one can't be careless. Seen from the eyes of Yatori, who has known him from a long time, that was more an indication of ill humor than nervousness would be.

...Let's give him a warning at once. That's what Yatori decided while gazing at his expressionless profile.

“Ikta. I'm saying this seriously, but during the audience, only return acceptable answers to the things you are asked. No matter who I am, I refuse to hold you down in the presence of His Highness.”

“...I got it. It's that my side hurts, and I would be suffering on my bed under normal circumstances.”

For the youth, it was a slightly lackluster retort. The horse-drawn carriage came to a stop as they were traveling.

They were instructed to get off by the palace guards outside, and the five of them finally stepped foot on the holy ground where the noblemen resided.

What first caught their eyes was the large temple edifice, built up by stacking smooth opalescent stones.

“...Impossible. This, the Holy White Temple...?”

Yatori's pupils dilated. --For when His Highness, the Emperor, greeted people, there were three buildings in the palace at Banhataal. They were the Yellow Sand Temple meant for meeting with guests from outside the country, the Deep Green Temple meant for hearing the reports of his retainers, and the Holy White Temple meant for praising those who rendered great service to the Imperial Household.

The one situated closest to the Imperial Palace, in other words the mansion where the Imperial Family carried out their lives, was the Holy White Temple which Yatori and the others currently had before them. The only ones allowed to have an audience with His Highness, the Emperor, in this building were chief vassals who had done a truly great service to the Empire. The highest stair for soldiers, the promotion to field marshal, was conducted here.

“Please follow.”

Guided by a chamberlain [32] dressed in long-hemmed ceremonial clothing, the five of them stepped forward into the Holy White Temple. Even the great Yatori nervously toned down her gait. Regardless if they saved Her Highness, the Princess, that was the deed of an ordinary person who didn't even hold an official rank. All she could think was that even if they did have an audience, it was something that could've been settled in the Deep Green Temple.

As a final review before entering they entered his presence, the maids corrected each of the five's

appearances. When they discerned that there was nothing that would be a cause for risk in front of His Highness, the bodyguard soldiers meant to be escorts, for whom it was allowed to wear swords, slowly opened the doors to the inner chamber.

In front of a lengthily laid out gold-colored carpet, the ruler of the country commanded the throne.

“Yatorishino Igsem, Matthew Tetdrich, Ikta Solork, Torway Remeon, Haroma Bekkel. -The aforementioned five people are visiting upon the summons of Your Highness, the Emperor.”

As soon as she gave that report, the chief chamberlain who had led them until now withdrew to the side and only the five young men and women remained in front of His Highness. The gazes of the nobility grew in pressure, and weighed on the backs of the five of them who were kneeling down.

“Chamille. These people's services, from your mouth.”

His deep, dry voice called to his daughter. Upon that, Her Highness, the Princess Chamille, emerged forth from the vanguard of the line of retainers dressed in a snow white sari dress. It seemed that the fatigue from the shipwreck healed completely within one month, and with her long blonde hair also regained its former beauty, she was just like a single flower bloomed on the temple edifice.

“I shall make my report, Father. --First, the service of saving from the brink of death myself, who was shaken into the sea by the tremors on the occasion that the ship headed toward the venue of the High Grade Military Officer Exam sunk due to a storm. Second, the service of forcing the enemy to retire with cleverness and the bravery to risk one's own life on the occasion that I was about to be captured by Republic soldiers. Third, the service of driving away my simple despair and finally escorting me across the national boundary by putting their quick wits to work despite finding ourselves with the misfortune of having Republic territory as the destination to which we drifted ashore at the end of the shipwreck.”

His Highness nodded lightly at the various services the princess listed and gazed at the forms of the honorable young men and women.

“Because of your services, my daughter, who shall inherit 900 years of the sacred blood of the Imperial Household, has returned to our roots without being captured by the savages of Kioka. You protected my blood kin- this is essentially equivalent to protecting the Empire. Therefore, young soldiers of our country's defense, I generously award you with medals of honor. --Raise your heads.”

Receiving permission, the five of them timidly raised their faces. Then, they looked upon the human who took the role of ruler of the country in which they were born into life from a close distance for the first time.

The Emperor was not yet aged. He might have been slightly older than a 40-year old in the prime of manhood. ...In spite of that, his bearing gave the impression of an enormous dead tree. The bony fingers of both his hands, his skin whose dryness was varnished over with large quantities of perfumed oil, his blonde hair faded to the ocher that lost both tone and luster, indicated the decline of both his mind and body without attempting to hide anything.

The dead tree with a crown on his head, relying solely on its dignity, slowly raised his right arm.

“Yatorishino Igsem, Matthew Tetdrich, Ikta Solork, Torway Remeon, Haroma Bekkel. --To these five people, today at this time, I grant the title of 'Imperial Knight.'”

A long, long silence descended. The Emperor's words didn't soak into the five of their heads that easily.

“...Imperial Knight...? ...Umm, that... in other words... a c-conferring of decorations!?”

In this moment, forgetting both his nervousness and decorum, Matthew's round face shone with joy. Next to him, Torway widened both of his eyes as if he'd seen a ghost in broad daylight. Only Yatori remained the same.

It wasn't illogical that the five of them would doubt their ears. The title of “Imperial Knight,” usually, was one of the supreme honors given only unto High Grade Military Officers who performed heavy services during war. The people who received this- although it was an honor limited to one person that could not be inherited by descendants- ‘’it added those people to the lowest seat of nobility’’.

The nobility under the Imperial class system existed for the purpose of selecting young people from influential pedigrees to be related to the Imperial Family through marriage, and as a general rule one did not rise to nobility from the common class. The near unique exception to that was the conferring of decorations of “Imperial Knight”, and numerous benefits came along with it. A large increase in pension, a more influential voice in political matters, permission to attend meetings hosted by the House of Nobles[33]...more rights than their young bodies could handle would come falling into their laps.

Therefore, Yatori and Torway couldn't simply rejoice. Even if the service had been saving the Third Princess, this was clearly an excessive reward, and it seemed to have thrown Torway, who couldn't bring himself to embrace it with both arms, for quite the loop. Why let it go without being suspicious of the hidden side?

While supporting Haro, who'd fainted from shock, Yatori nonchalantly sent a slanted gaze behind her. ...There was no color in the face of Ikta Solork. His clenched fists were trembling uncontrollably.

Some way or other pushing back the urge to immediately leap forward and strangle the neck of the head of the Emperor-- that's the feeling Yatori got. She was almost certain.

When the arrangements for the conferring of decorations were over, the Emperor leaned his weight on the throne as if that had completely tired his out. The chief chamberlain took care of everything that came after. The details concerning the preparation of the 'Imperial Knights,' and the results of the High Grade Military Officer Exam which had been interrupted by that incident. Here, their passing of the exam on account of the five's special circumstances was announced to them. Though, since they were told after the conferring of decorations, both their surprise and joy had been weak.

Their unexpected audience ended without any indication, and the five of them were led down from the

inner chamber before anyone could accurately make sense of the situation.

With Yatori, who was shouldering a fainted Haro, at their head, they left the Holy White Temple. Outside, in front of two covered horse-drawn wagons, the princess, clad in a white sari dress, was waiting for them.

“...Your Highness, Chamille...”

“I trust that was troublesome. But, please come with me for a little longer. Starting now, there will be a ceremony celebrating your conferring of decorations.”

With that short announcement, Her Highness, the Princess, boarded onto the left carriage on step ahead of them.

“We will be riding separately in threes. Yatori and Solork ride in this one. The remaining three in the other.”

It was a meaningful division. Everyone boarded as they were being told, and the carriage began moving not long after. While they were three people using a space that six might have used easily, Her Highness, the Princess, in the middle of a closed off guest cabin, began the conversation.

“No matter what we say here, the coachman can't hear us. You don't need to hold back anymore, Solork.”

The princess spoke as if she'd seen through Ikta's innermost thoughts. Ikta unclenched the fists he had held tightly all this time, breathed a single magnificent sigh, and ruffled his own black hair.

“You really came through, Princess. You've completely and utterly messed up my life plan. When- even if heaven and earth turned over- a soldier was the last thing I wanted to become...”

The youth who'd been an ordinary person until just an hour ago moaned. ...Yes, Ikta was already a soldier.

It wasn't because he'd passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam due to special circumstances. In the end, that was simply receiving approval to enter the army as leading cadet, and the recipient himself could refuse it if he wanted to. Under normal circumstances.

The problem was the fact that he was conferred the title of “Imperial Knight.” The conferring of decorations was an order from Emperor under the guise of a reward. Seeing that he was a commoner, this wasn't something he could refuse. Even more troublesome, that title involved enlistment in the military ‘’whether he wanted to or not’’. The reasoning was plain and simple: ‘’a knight couldn't not be a soldier.’’

“Since I've become a soldier, I can't defy directions from the army anymore. At this point, it's not 'authorization' to advance to a High Grade Military Officer Academy- it's an 'order.' ...The librarian post at the National Library I worked so hard to get is worthless now. I don't even have the energy to get angry anymore.”

Finding the excess space being a good thing, Ikta laid the half of his body above his hips on the seat. On the expression of her Highness, the Princess, who was watching this youth, though she was keeping up appearances with a blank face, feelings of guilt were faintly showing through.

“...Your Highness, we are grateful for having received unmerited honor. However, isn't it unnatural all the same?”

Yatori opened her mouth in exchange. The princess was silent and listened intently.

“'Imperial Knight'- as its wording signifies, should be a title given unto soldiers who have performed a great, meritorious war service. 'Knight,' since it's a decoration awarded to soldiers; the people who are given the title 'Knight' are already soldiers, therefore the order is backwards. As far as I know, there is no precedent for this conferring of decorations.”

“There is no precedent. Therefore, one was created with you.”

“Your Highness...”

“Yatori, I beg you, don't criticize me with that face! Of course, I did support it. However, your conferring of decorations was not my idea, but the desire of the entire membership of the Katjvarna Cabinet.”

While still laying down, Ikta scoffed at Her Highness, the Princess's weak defense.

“...Even if it's a fixed game in reality, if the citizens witness the fall of the Eastern Stronghold, it's nothing more than a 'losing battle.' Their hatred is directed toward Kioka, and once they've pinned the blame on the army, it's human nature to can't help but feel uneasy, right?”

“...”

“Who you want to have at this time are idols who will inspire hope in the citizens... in short, heroes.”

The princess sighed. The accuracy of Ikta's guesses was reliable, more than that, it was even frightening.

“...That's correct. The timing of our safe return was too convenient. Young military cadets return home with the Third Princess who'd gone missing from Kioka as it was on the verge of taking back the Eastern Province. Amidst the unfortunate reports of the losing war, this news has become the sole light for the citizens. The government had no choice but to make use of this.”

“Ahh, so that's it? I guess royalty does have the privilege of toying with the lives of ordinary citizens.”

Ikta's sarcasm, devoid of any humor, had quickly become nothing more than a sword forged from words.

“At any rate, we're now the heroes who're supposed to reassure the hearts of the 20 million people in

the Empire. ...Well, let's put that aside for the moment. As much as it annoys me, it's not like imperial commands are going to change if we start complaining now. The thing I want to ask about before anything is something different.

--Hey, Princess. Just what the hell do you want by corralling us like this?"

Raising his upper body, Ikta finally cut to the heart of the matter.

“It's the one thing that's been bothering me from that start. What was someone like the Third Princess doing aboard a ship headed for the Hirgano Archipelago? Even an extremely sophisticated person such as myself can't come up with a single good reason for you to have gone.”

“Th-that was part of official business. In light of the deterioration of the state of war with Kioka, to encourage the military cadets bearing the burden of this country's future...”

“If your behavior had been immature for your age, then I'd have no problem accepting that cover for your true intentions. ...But, it's too late for that. Whatever it was, you've shown too much of your intelligence, you see. Not just me but Yatori and even Torway caught on that you, Princess, were keeping something to your tiny self. --Kusu, Highbeam.”

Kusu, held in Ikta's arms, bathed Her Highness, the Princess, in a strong light. As if illuminating the inside of her secret heart.

“Ahh.. S-stop it, Solork, it's bright...”

“I'll just spit the truth out already. When we young men and women, just starting out with great potential for success, answered the call to guard the Princess... it's obvious that we only came to make connections anticipating the profits in the distant future.”

Whether or not it was a response to the conferring of the title “Imperial Knight,” Ikta was unusually sadistic about criticizing the girl. However, it didn't seem that the princess would let her scene partner assume the leading role indefinitely.

“...Is that cynicism something you learned from your father, Solork?... No, ‘’Ikta Sankrei’’?”

That moment, the youth stopped blinking. He made Kusu shut off the light by a sign with his finger, and glared keenly at his scene partner.

“...So the Imperial Family's prided Central Intelligence Unit doesn't even need one month to investigate someone's personal history?”

“The only one who can deploy them is the reigning emperor. I'm not able to use them, and there was no need to use them this time anyway. Excellence in intelligence, tact, effectiveness in times of emergency. Taking on the accent of a Kioka citizen defected from the Empire. And above all, your threatening attitude toward the currently deceased Lieutenant Rikan, seeking the retreat of the whole army in defiance of Imperial command. Gathering the clues until now, there is more than enough for me to entertain a slight suspicion.”

Having regained control of the conversation flow, the princess suddenly turned an apologetic gazed toward Yatori.

“I must apologize to you, Yatori. In order to investigate Solork's past, I negotiated with the Igsem Family without going through you. Since, witnessing the trust you two share, there seemed to be few things hidden between you.”

“...My father, talked about it...?”

“He did try to hide it. However, so he would have to speak to me, I commanded him with the power of the state. When I heard the truth by coercing him in that manner, though, the strength of your relationship became more and more mysterious.”

There was tint of confusion in the Her Highness, the Princess's eyes when there was no evidence that the mystery would become clear.

“Despite formerly being an outstanding commander, he was branded with the dishonor of 'war criminal' for defying orders in the middle of an operation before meeting his end in imprisonment during the postwar period of the previous military campaign with Kioka, Commander-in-chief of the Imperial Army, General Bada Sankrei. And you are his posthumous son, Ikta.”

In the face of the trump card which Her Highness, Chamille, revealed, Ikta averted his eyes as if he were annoyed.

“I wasn't born from notch of a tree, I mean, even Ikta-kun has parents. The man who provided the small seed for my birth might've had that name, now that I think about it.”

What was twisted has become outright childish. That's what the princess thought once she reclaimed the leading role. Since that was something which had been taken from her ever since she'd met him, it also felt that, somehow, she was reclaiming her pride along with it, and without realizing it she was becoming more and more arrogant.

“I still have more! The person whom you called teacher, who was the first to preach the said way of thinking called 'science', wasn't he the old professor who defected last year from the Empire to the Kioka Republic, the 'blasphemer' Anarai Kahn? It seems that he was the long sworn friend of Bada Sankrei.”

“Though the nickname 'blasphemer,' I think that the old man took it as a compliment.”

“I'm not nearly done yet! Your Kiokan accent was something you learned from your mother wasn't it? At the time of victory, I hear that a beautiful woman whom the decadent reigning emperor had summoned to his harem from Kioka was granted to General Bada as a reward for distinguished service in war. Her name, if I remember correctly, wasn't it Yuuka Sankrei!?”

The light of reason vanished from Ikta's eyes, and his right hand, darting out, snatched the princess's collar. This time, he even shoved Yatori- who had immediately moved to stop him- aside with his left hand.

“---Try saying one more insulting thing about my mother. I'll strangle you to death with this hand.”

Ikta glared at the princess with a murderous expression he'd seldom ever shown. It didn't last long--he released her when Yatori regained her stance. ...However, that was enough. The incident lasting barely a few seconds carved the fear of 'being hated by someone' into the immature, young girl.

“...This is an uncomfortable conversation. When that happens, then I have to strangle you as well.”

While shielding the princess, who was in a state of shock, with her back, Yatori advised him in a low voice. Ikta, having calmed down, raised both hands and showed nonviolent intentions which contradicted his behavior.

With that, their conversation was interrupted. When the princess's breathing, as she was being soothed by Yatori, all but returned to normal, the carriage, which had reached its destination, came to a stop. Ikta was the very first to open the door and come down from the guest cabin.

Quite some time should have passed by, but they were somehow still inside the garden. They had been transported to a plaza in the east suitable for the celebratory banquet. Within the garden, which was trimmed with vivid flowers in full bloom, luxurious food in a completely different league from the Imperial Academy Graduation Commemoration Party was lined on the tables, and high-class military persons and nobles with drinks[34] in one hand were mingling with light conversation.

“Ahh thank goodness- celebratory banquets really are first-class. I'm feeling a little better with this, you know.”

“Wait, Ikta, Her Highness still...!”

Taking no notice of the princess's pale face, Ikta located Matthew and the others standing in a slightly removed location and promptly moved to meet up with them. Of course Yatori's voice would have a tinge of criticism.

While having his back turned toward them, the youth spoke in a dry voice.

“Hey, Yatori. You passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam, and that came along with the title of 'Imperial Knight', which is leagues above just top of a class. Sure there's a teeny reason not to be satisfied, but if you measure the pros and cons, today is undoubtedly a day for you to commemorate. Am I right?”

“...”

“On the contrary, how is it for me, I wonder? These things are exactly the same for me you see, and it's without question the worst day of my life. Between today and the day my mother died, it's hard to say which was better. In any case, even though it was the absolute last thing I ever wanted for my life, I became three things at once today. A nobleman, a soldier-- and a hero.

“On a day like this, for the time being I'm just going to drink until I don't know anything anymore.

That's the only thing I can think of."

Finishing his speech with a wavering voice, without even returning a single glance toward Her Highness, the Princess, Ikta finally took his leave.

Likely, nowhere in the world did words exist that might have stopped him.

Katjvanmaninik's Watchdogs

Inside the Imperial Army Capital Base, the High Grade Military Officer Academy. A practice facility at a location about 30 kilometers south from the Capital Banhataal. The Katjvarna Empire at present had adopted a volunteer soldier system, and over 4,000 exclusive soldiers were stationed at the Imperial Army Capital Base during peace time.

“Run like you mean it! Privates or generals, I ain't putting up with no weak soldiers!”

A hysterical voice beside them rang out to the cloudless blue sky. For all ages and countries, the “instructors” at army facilities are basically “demon instructors.” According to them, the training of subordinates, starting with the smashing of the sparkling treasures which new recruits enclosed in the chamber of their chests- mainly those naive illusions called free will or individual dignity- into tiny, tiny pieces.

“What's the matter, Warrant Officer Matthew Tetdrich! Wasn't 'Moving Blubber' supposed your selling point!? A blockhead meatball ain't nothing but a human shield on the battlefield!”

“...S-sir, yes, sir!”

“Your pace is slowing down, Warrant Officer Haroma Bekkel! Medics need to find injured people and run around faster than anyone! You think you're good for anything with that weak stamina?”

“Gasp- gasp- wheeze- Sir, yes sir!”

“Haro-san, keep going, just a little more...!”

“So you still have the energy to look out for someone else's exhaustion- not bad, Warrant Officer Torway Remeon! You just earned your kind self an additional three weeks! Be thankful for it!”

“...Sir, yes sir...!”

“Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem! Since you seem to love leading the charge, I'll reserve the front of the line for you! I'm not letting you run anywhere else! If you're overtaken, you’re not stopping until you overtake 'em back!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

There were a total of 32 people, 24 males and 8 females, who passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam this time. For the first three months, which were devoted to basic drills, the group was gathered to receive grueling training from their instructor. Marathons, obstacle courses, group work, marksmanship, close-quarters combat...their focus at this time was no different from that of a normal soldier.

Made to run like idiots for the time being, they received collective punishments for absurd reasons and spent their time receiving enough verbal abuse from the instructor to short out their ears. It was the rite of passage for ordinary people to become soldiers. Till their bodies reacted before their minds to the instructor's commands, they would continue doing this, and only this.

“You're a lap behind, Warrant Officer Ikta Solork! Aren't you embarrassed to be causing trouble for your friends?! You look like you're dying with those eyes! You're better off packing your things and going home!”

“No...that's exactly what I want from you...”

“Did you say something?! I didn't hear you!”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Just what did I do wrong to deserve this?”

Ikta grumbled, not learning from his mistakes. They were eating heavily spiced stew from a large pot together with a light tandoori baked bread during their lunch break, which they had immediately after somehow making it through morning training. Irritatingly, the location was outdoors.

“I wonder, is it because I'm loose with women?”

“In any case, the Imperial Army uniform looks good on you, Warrant Officer Ikta.”

Yatori made her jab with a composed face. The entire group was dressed in sleeveless shirts and burnt brown pants. Officially, they’d add a jacket and a hat to that with a rank insignia on the left side of the chest. Even the spirits in their hip pouches were wearing red tiaras on their heads to signify their military employment. If the one who looked best wearing this army uniform were Yatori, then her counterpart would undoubtedly be Ikta. Not even counting appearance as an issue, though, it was too big for him.

“Munchmunch.... Hey Warrant Officer Ikta, if you're not going to finish that I'm taking it.”

“My buddy Matthew, I'm waiting for this to cool. ...Or should I say, because you might as well since you're a wind spirit holder, it'd be great if you could give everyone a refreshing breeze. Hey, you Ikemen over there, too.”

As Ikta shamelessly made his request, Torway ordered his kind-hearted partner Safi to stir up the wind. Matthew's wind spirit Tsuu also followed suit.

“T-that's a grea~t help...! Do this every day- It's so hot I could die~...”

Looking about as exhausted as Ikta, Haro unsteadily came into where the wind was blowing. Her partner, the water spirit Miru, was able to make ice, but since the amount he could produce in a single

day was limited, she had been ordered by the instructor to save it and be ready for when an injured person appeared.

“Cheer up, Ik-kun, Haro-san. The schedule for the afternoon is group work and bow gun [35] shooting practice, and after is classroom lecture. Running around is pretty much limited to the marathon. And even that is much more enjoyable at night than it is now.”

“Was that supposed to cheer us up? Also, you said Ik-kun.”

Ikta angled Safi's “wind tunnel” toward himself while speaking. Yatori huffed angrily at him.

“Hey, no wind's coming this way, is it? Don't hog the breeze if you're going to complain.”

“Hmph- to think that the Imperial Knight who also graduated top of her class can't even allow another person to have some wind.”

“There's a flaw[36] waiting wherever you hear reasoning, you know. --If you're a chivalrous Imperial Knight, then naturally it's ladies first- am I wrong, Ikta-kun?”

Countering with that, Yatori held Safi in her arms for a moment, and set him down on the ground so that the wind would strike her and Haro. As Ikta was wearily returning to his meal, in front of his eyes, three shadows suddenly appeared.

“Yo, blockhead Imperial Knight-sama. Hope you don't mind that we're a week late.”

Unlike that of Yatori and Matthew, a completely rotten sarcasm made its presence known. As Ikta blankly looked up at his scene partners, the faces he anticipated were lined up. The macho Agora, the bucktoothed Colsara, the bulgy-eyed Niira. Among those who passed in his year, they were a trio that hung out with each other from the very beginning.

“We prepared a special energy drug for ya, weakling Knight-sama. Hey, give us your bowl.”

A long, thin, wriggling object fell from Colsara's hand, and fell into the bowl Ikta was holding. Haro, watching the situation with an uneasy feeling, gave a small shriek.

The thing squirming inside the sea of stew was a large insect with countless jointed limbs- a centipede.

“I heard that they dip this in wine and drink it in Kioka. Come on, try it.”

Agora folded his log-like arms and grinned broadly. Then, Ikta abruptly took on a serious expression, and took hold of a sharp rock lying around nearby. Niira, shaking where he stood, jumped up and lost his cool.

“W-w-what's this?! Hey you, you wanna go?!?”

“Alright!”

Ikta threw the sharp rock at the centipede, which was waiting for a good time to flee outside the bowl.

Yellowish bodily fluids spattered everywhere, and the headless body of the insect writhed, displaying all the more vigor.

In the next scene, the trio, Agora, Colsara, and Niira, had their goosebumps raised out of horror. Ikta carried the centipede he killed to his mouth with his fingers, and slurped it down like vermicelli. It made a sound like the crunching of bird cartilage, and after chewing it for a while, he gulped it down completely.

“--Thanks for the meal. By the way, centipedes, you see, although they're fine to eat, they have poison in their fangs so it's dangerous if you don't take the head off, you know. Treat me next time, too. Also, centipede wine is an urban legend. At the very least, it's not a popular menu item in Kioka.”

While giving his nonchalant explanation, Ikta scarfed down the centipede-dipped stew. The trio had been watching him in blank amazement, but before long Agora turned his heel without a word and the other two followed suit.

While watching their queasy figures retreating, Yatori made a bitter smile and shrugged her shoulders.

“I guess there's a limit to how much one doesn't know one's enemy. Even taking that that into account, though, trying to scare Ikta with an insect...”

“Well, it was my staple food at one point. Half of my body is made from insects.”

Ikta puffed up his chest as if he were proud. On one side, Haro was still glaring at the backs of the departed trio.

“That was horrible, just now. If that were me, I wouldn't be able to control myself.”

“Well, it's not as if that's the first time it happened anyway. Isn't it charming how childish their methods are?”

Ikta said it carefreely. Yatori, having known him a long time, understood. – This man was mysteriously generous toward the things called “childishness,” “immaturity,” and “the carelessness of youth.” It appeared that was the reason for his interest in Matthew. On the other hand, since he didn't seem to like her mature behavior for her age, it was also something that agreed with his poor affinity with Her Highness, Chamille.

“Under normal circumstances, our 'Order of Knights' would be a target for jealousy. It would be troublesome to have those kind of people as our scene partners, so it'd be great for us if they concentrate their attacks on Ikta.”

“Yatori-san, isn't that a bit...”

An overly direct comment escaped Torway. --Since the five of them, the members of the shipwreck,

had received a medal and enrolled, they naturally became known as the “Order of Knights” by those around them. Of course, rather than with respect, it was a name riddled with jealousy and contempt, and there were those who denounced them as “the group that passed the Exam with the Third Princess's connections.” Since that was true in a way, it was hard to make a rebuttal.

...Nonetheless, the larger half of why they focused their attacks on Ikta had to do with the person himself. Ikta, who had no desire to pass the Exam since the start, when compared those who passed and were the best of the best, fell even lower than inferior in terms of physical strength, and been magnificently standing in the way of those around him since the very start of training. He contributed no obvious interest in trying, so even sarcastically being called “blockhead Imperial Knight-sama” was justified.

Matthew, having completely satisfied his hunger, spoke while patting his round stomach, which hadn't changed that much.

“Whaat? Ignoring those kind of people is best, you know. The weaker the dog, the louder it barks- right?”

“What you said does have a point.” “What you said has a point, you know.”

“Why the hell are you in sync like that!? You guys are too creepy!”

When Matthew inflated his cheeks and pouted, Haro also huffed. With this feeling, though there were various problems with their circumstances, the cast of the “Order of Knights” were at least getting along well.

They made it through group work and marksmanship training, and it was finally time for the indoor classroom lecture. As Ikta, completely exhausted, as collapsed on a classroom desk, there was the presence of someone sitting immediately next to him, and he was woken up from his dreaming.

“This seat. You don't mind if I sit here, Warrant Officer Solork?”

She spoke while flipping her beautiful blonde hair. ...Burnt brown lower garments and a white shirt, and a Warrant Officer rank insignia. No matter how she looked, it was the same outfit as Ikta's, one for High Grade Military Officer Cadets, but the size of everything was extremely small. When he looked at the person herself, she was of an age where she might have been attending a Middle Grade Academy.

“...Neither the desk nor the chair belongs to me, so. Feel free to do whatever, ‘’Warrant Officer Chamille-sama’’.”

His voice was cold. --Originally, the Imperial Family receiving education in military affairs, considering that the army was an institution of the Katjvarna Empire in which the Emperor stood supreme, was not particularly an unnatural thing. There were two major peculiarities. Her Highness Chamille's age of 12 years, and her admittance to the High Grade Military Academy in the same position as other Cadets.

Concerning her young age, it seemed that she had passed on account of her premature intelligent manner and some arm-twisting using her status as a member of the Imperial Family. Her entering the High Grade Military Academy as a Warrant Officer seemed to be part of a larger political measure devised to improve the image of the Imperial Family. --Although, that meant that one should keep in mind that the motives of the person herself were, again, ‘’something different’’.

At the same time Her Highness, the Princess, reached the seat, the instructor entered the classroom and the lecture began. At this moment, they hadn't explored the contents of the lecture that deeply yet-it was a review meant to reaffirm their foundation in Tactics, which each of them had studied before coming to something like the High Grade Academy.

Both Ikta and the princess were equally bored. Around when the youth yawned for a seventh time, she boldly began writing a private message to her neighbor in the notebook [37] she was taking notes on.

--Is your life here okay? Just, it seems to me that you've gotten a bit skinnier.

Noticing that he was being addressed by the writing, Ikta also thought a bit and wrote a reply on his own notebook.

--Anyone would get skinnier whether they liked it or not, you know. Have you tried running as much as we do?

The princess, jabbed in a painful place, hummed in dissatisfaction. In actuality, she wasn't “in the same position as other Cadets.” Though that might be the case in things like Tactics, for the hard training, athletics and close quarters combat, an exclusive menu was put together for Her Highness, the Princess, by the instructors who had received directions from the Imperial Family. Ikta had made a cynical jab about that. Though objectively speaking, his attitude was rather immature....

--I can't take afternoon naps, I can't drink alcohol, I'm not allowed to get close to delectable females. My three great desires were splendidly destroyed. Tell me, what am I supposed to live for in a place like this?

His openly-stated complaints were listed one after the other. The princess sighed while moving her chalk.

--Before long, the three month period of basic drills will be over, and our education as military officers should officially begin. Now, everyone is a Warrant Officer in name only, but once we have subordinates our treatment would naturally change, right?

--What I want right now is my own room, not subordinates. With the three levels of beds in the dormitories, I can't bring along a lover.

--A-a woman... is that the only thing you have in your head? You'd get in trouble for saying that to me here, honestly.

--Oh, excuse me for that. I chose the wrong confidant. That's a difficult conversation to have with

someone else's child.

At the sentence, which reeked of sarcasm, the princess's heart swelled with disgust and indignation. --It was always like this! Even though I was trying my best to be considerate and have a conversation, when it comes to him, this man won't open up his heart even a little bit! No matter how nicely I try to connect with him, the all he does is return with is that malicious sarcasm.

However, in relation to the fact that she bound Ikta to the military register by conferring the title of "Imperial Knight," Her Highness, Chamille, felt indebted to him. She also owed him a debt of gratitude for the two times she was rescued from a predicament. When she thought of that, however coldly she was treated, the princess couldn't bring herself to be angry at the youth.

Besides... while failing to make communication with him, her depressed feeling settled together with her anger in her chest. The princess didn't understand it too well. She still didn't have a friend to whom she was close enough to so that she could ask advice about her misfortunes and these kinds of problems.

"...in the middle of his military campaign, of which could it be said that the activities of the non-commissioned officers especially stood out? Warrant Officer Chamille."

"-!?"

A question suddenly came flying at her from the instructor, and Her Highness, the Princess, stood up while panicking. However, nothing followed that. No matter how brilliant she was, if she didn't hear the contents of the question, there was no way she could answer it.

"Page 123."

Ikta muttered quietly next to the incredibly embarrassed princess with a textbook in her hand. Realizing that it was a hint, she also quickly flipped to the page.

"...the Offensive of Avhelia?"

"That is correct. Please be seated."

The princess relaxed and sat back down in her seat. The skinny instructor turned a malicious eye toward her neighbor.

"Well then-- please state the details and historical military significance of this fight. Warrant Officer Ikta Solork."

An obviously difficult question had made its way around to Ikta. This was also an everyday occurrence. He took every opportunity to show off his lack of effort, and as a result, he was disliked not only by those in his year and those above him, but even by a particular instructor.

However, this person, unyielding to the torments of his surroundings and continuing being disliked even now, was not normal. Ikta stood up while stifling a yawn, and began to show his true nature.

"… It is one aspect of the 'battle of Yaponik' which occurred in Year 788 of the Imperial Era, at the time of the Emperor's expedition to the far east Yaponik Island, which is currently territory of the Kioka Republic. The commander from the Imperial side was Captain Giorgo Irsim. He was a great commander who used his distinguished war service at this time as a chance to shoot up to the rank of general, and is presently enshrined as a military hero."

"Continue."

"The Offensive of Avhelia—more accurately, the 'Individual Offensives of the Avhelia Wetlands', when considering the norms of the time, had been begun from a strikingly disadvantageous state of affairs for the Empire. It was a critical moment in which the 800 soldiers of the independent battalion under Captain Irsim's direction were attacked from three directions, north, east, and west according to the Yaponik Army's Three-Battalion, 1600-Solider Plan and, failing to retreat immediately, were completely surrounded by twice as many forces.

"However, at a point where retreat would be the only option for a normal commander, Captain Irsim took the complete opposite action. In addition to making the soldiers under his command discard half of their provisions and air mortar cannons, which had become deadweight, and lightening the bodies of all his troops, he forced an advance which could be considered insane.

"His goal was simple. To deal with enemy soldiers closing in from three directions, north, east, and west, by 'fighting them one at a time before they merge'- that is, the Individual Offensive Strategy. Even if his entire forces were inferior to those of the enemy, if the enemy forces were broken up in three units, they were stronger than each of the enemy groups. If they fight against their enemy after they merge their forces, there is no doubt that they'd lose at once, but if they fight with the enemy three times in succession before that happened, then they'd win. Confident in that, Captain Irsim engaged in a series of battles and ultimately acquired a dramatic victory as per his intentions."

The instructor's face distorted in an increasingly loathsome expression as Ikta spoke smoothly.

"It is commonly said that the military significance of this battle is that 'it created a precedent for a tactical victory reversing a strategic defeat'. Even if all outlooks are bleak, one can reverse the outcome if one can accumulate localized victories. To the present day, it has left an impact on the spirit of the Imperial Army, and 'Imitate Irsim!' has become a set phrase for times of encouraging inferior forces. –However, is that really the case?"

Strongly contradictory words intercepted the instructor's mouth, which moved to permit him to take a seat. The eyes of the students in the room turned to Ikta one after the other. By the time the princess happened to take notice, he was the focus of the area.

"I believe that having Irsim's victory function simply as the foundation of the army spirit is a waste. 'A tactical victory reversed a strategic defeat' is one aspect of the act, but for soldiers in the times to come, we must enter that act into calculations and develop tactics. Therefore, we shouldn't simply praise Captain Irsim's standplay here, we should read into the tactical superiority of which only he took notice.

“There are three places where Captain Irsim’s forces were better compared to the Yaponik Army. First, unlike the enemy, who were divided into three units, his military forces were collected. Second, they were overwhelmingly light of foot compared with the enemy and superior in mobility. And third, due to their survey in advance, they had a thorough knowledge of the terrain of the Avhelia Wetlands. These three factors painted a much more realistic transition in the war in his mind than compared to the leaders of the Yaponik Army.

“If I put it simply. First, the leaders of the Yaponik Army saw ‘the forces of allies and enemies in the Avhelia Wetlands’ and had confidence in the superiority of their own army. But for Captain Irsim, he was able to read into ‘where the enemy-ally forces were deployed in the Avhelia Wetlands at each point time’. As a result, the merits of both armies were reversed in his mind.”

The students in the classroom barring none, including even the instructor at this point, were listening to Ikta’s speech. …No, to be accurate there was just one exception. The fiery haired girl sitting in the front row hadn’t even been listening until now.

“I wonder if you understand. Captain Irsim added a third criterion, ‘the whereabouts of forces at each point in time’ to the wars which until then had used only ‘the location of battle’ and ‘the comparison of both forces’ as material for a conclusion. He made the 2-dimensional battle evolve into a 3-dimensional battle- this is his true achievement, you see.

If we are to inherit his legacy, the leaders of the modern times can’t look at a map aimlessly when they open one on the battlegrounds. Just as if they’re picturing the board of blindfolded shogi game, they must imagine the forces moving around the top of the map in real time.”

Judging that his prolonged speech had ended, Torway began applauding from beside the window. The other students, acting in accordance, even if it wasn’t all of them, put their hands together with a feeling of honest admiration. It’s an ironic story, but for Ikta, it was good fortune that these people were his audience. The students in this place, having only passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam, had the elementary training to understand the value of his speech.

Responding to the applause by lightly waving his hand, as if he had been satisfied with it, Ikta sunk back into his chair like a puppet with its strings cut. His lifeless face, laid sideways on his desk, seemed to belong to a completely different person than earlier.

“However…” thought the princess. “It’s irritating to acknowledge him, but I think I’d like to see more of the intelligence and energy he shows so randomly like this.”

Ikta did occasionally show glimpses of talent during their classroom lectures, but in their training besides that, he was quite the dimwit. He was particularly bad at close-quarters combat and marksmanship. Let’s excerpt one part of an episode that clearly shows that disastrous spectacle below.

“Warrant Officer Ikta, get the hell up! The enemy ain’t waiting around for you in the middle of a fight!”

“Ahh, he didn’t get to break his fall as he fainted that time. Let’s wake him up now, shall we? –Here goes!”

As Ikta fainted, Yatori immediately came over and revived him. Confirming that he returned to his partner after getting up somehow or other, the instructor was satisfied and went to observe the others. But, however….

“…What’s this? Even though he was just revived earlier, Warrant Officer Ikta collapsed again?” - “Ahh, he just took a vital blow to his stomach that time. Let’s wake him up now, shall we? –Here goes!”

Yatori came and revived him a second time. Since he got up for the time being, the instructor relaxed and went to see the others. However, when he came back three minutes later, he was collapsed in the same manner again.

“…Oi, Warrant Officer Ikta’s spitting foam from his mouth. Is he doing alright…?”

“Ahh, he went limp because he got caught in a stranglehold that time. Let’s wake him up now, shall we? --Here goes!”

Yatori, coming for a third time, didn’t let the youth rest in peace this time either. Ikta, barely getting up, tried to return to sparring with a blank face, but in the process, collapsed unexpectedly and began convulsing.

“W-warrant Officer Ikta!? We’ve got an injury- Medic!”

“Ahh, his muscles malfunctioned due to the side effects of the revival method that time. Let’s wake him up now, shall we? Here-”

“Enough already! It’s fine, just carry him to the medical office!”

Ikta left behind a legend as the man who fainted four times- three times by his partner- until the instructor had ordered a stop. Incidentally, it seems that Yatori also began to be addressed with “-san” by those in her year after that.

Again, there is another one of these story besides that one. The story of what happened during the marksmanship training with a bow gun. Since no one besides wind spirit holders can use an air shooter, this thing, which anyone could use, was a long-distance armament common for all soldiers, but….

“…Warrant Officer Ikta. Can you really see the target?”

“Of course I can see it. My eyes are at least that good.”

“You flipped a coin ten times, and it landed on the wrong side each time. Well, I suppose it’s also a question of chance.”

“Whatever the case, I’ll land 2 out of 5 shots. I’ve shot ten times until now, and they all missed, you see, so from now on, there should be an ‘aftershock’ in order to restore the statistical balance. Well, please see it for yourself. Since by my calculations, I’ll definitely hit 5-6 times consecutively.”

While making that declaration, Ikta turned the pulley, drew the bowstring, and nocked a new arrow. …But, this time, the arrow he aimed and fired at the target flew in a course away from the target again and stuck in the ground.

“…You missed again.”

“Ehh, too bad.”

“What happened to your calculations before?”

“I missed 11 consecutive shots. So I should hit 7-8 times consecutively…”

Not letting him finish his words, the instructor’s fist slammed into the back of Ikta’s head.

“This kinda crap isn’t chance! Why don’t you fix those 2 outta 5 shots odds of yours?!”

This is a good example of infuriating your superiors by picking a needless argument. It goes without saying that Ikta was forced into taking nothing but rigorous man-to-man training until he somehow produced an average accuracy rate.

As Ikta was imposing his presence on his surroundings- for better or for worse- the rest of the ‘Order of Knights’ were receiving their own individual training. Yatori was still aware of Torway as a rival as usual, but there was the difference in their targeted Division, and a chance for the two of them to compare their abilities hadn’t come yet. Instead, since they were both fellow Air Gunner Soldiers, Torway and Matthew’s association intensified.

The sound of compressed air being released overlapped countless times and rang across the outdoor shooting range. An air shooter, set up to enclose the spirit’s entire body, aimed at a far off target, and fired. It was the shooting range for gathering the wind spirit holding students.

“…--Woosh, --woosh… thud!”

A bullet, casually aimed and fired, penetrated a central part of humanoid target 40 meters ahead of it. Even among the students bragging about their skill in marksmanship, Torway Remeon’s technique was the best by far. Rather, his depth of knowledge concerning marksmanship was just fundamentally different from that of other students.

“You hit again, huh… It’s frustrating, but with your skill, it seems like you could defeat the enemy’s commander.”

While huffing a sigh, Matthew put a bullet into his own air shooter. As much as he, hating to lose, had to acknowledge him, there was a distinct difference between their accuracy rates. The difference

wasn't so visible if it were 10 or 20 meters, but when the distance increased more than that, Matthew's bullets slowly stopped reaching their mark.

"Thanks, Maa-kun. …Though even if I don't go as far as to aim for a commander, being able to hit a far off target in itself is a great advantage. First, I think that I want to master that."

Saying that, Torway fired another shot. The number of holes in the target didn't increase. However, it wasn't because he missed, it was because it pierced through the same hole as the one before it.

"It's hasn't been 100 years since the air shooter arrived to the battlefield, and its existence has actually displaced the Javelin Division as the main offensive division of the Army. I think that their dominance will still continue for a quite a while. The Remeon Family invented the Line of Battle Firearm Combat Tactic, but aside from that, I want to add a new page to 'the history of guns on the battlefield'."

"You talk big, don't you? But, what exactly is this new page? Another gunner strategy?"

"It's just a vague idea, so I guess it's confidential for now. Ask me again next time, okay Maa-kun?"

When they completely used the bullets they were given, the "cease fire!" command came from the instructor. Taking that as a signal, Torway and Matthew removed the barrels from their wind spirits, stored Safi and Tsuu in their respective pouches, and formed a line together with the rest of the students.

"As of now, morning training is over! Take your lunch break- Dismissed!"

The students breathed a sigh of relief. After they ate until the start of afternoon lessons was their precious free time.

"It's finally over. For now, let's meet up with Ik-kun and the others in the cafeteria, shall we?"

"Somehow it's like the 'Order of Knights' always lumps together, no? Well, for today we're just hanging out."

The two of them started walking in unison, but when they entered the shadow of the storehouse while taking a shortcut to the cafeteria, they ended up running into a large group of people who gathered there previously. They were about five older, slightly raspy-voiced upperclassmen officers smoking tobacco.

"…Ahh, what the hell'd you come for? This here's a dead end."

"A warrant officer rank insignia… meaning they're newcomers to the High Grade Military Officer Course, am I right?"

"Are you guys baby chicklets? Oi, if you wanna go to the cafeteria, stop bein' lazy and take the boardwalk."

They broke into obnoxious laughter. It shouldn't have been allowed for them to smoke tobacco there, but the nature of the upperclassmen-lowerclassmen relationship in the army was powerful to an unreasonable extent. In times like this, one had to surrender to one's seniors.

"P-please excuse us! …Oi, let's go back, Torway."

Quick to understand, Matthew moved to turn around, but Torway didn't move from where he stood.

"Torway? Come on, we gotta go."

"…Y-yea…"

Torway had finally come to his senses, but his gaze was still turned to the center, going back and forth between the two upperclassmen officers. Maybe they noticed but… they turned suspicious eyes toward him, and finally grasped the situation.

"—Huh? What's this, isn't that Toruru?"

A strangely friendly voice rang out, and one of the upperclassmen officers stood up. He was a handsome, blue-eyed male. In addition to his eyes, the long hair on his head was also the same shade of light green as Torway's. A wind spirit was stored in the pouch on his hip, but in addition to that, he was carrying an awfully large-caliber air shooter barrel on his shoulder. His rank was first lieutenant.

"Sariha-nii-sama , Sushura-nii-san…"

Torway called the names of his companions in a shaking voice. The young man called Sariha walked halfway over.

"It's been a while, Toruru, you been doing alright? Hmm? No, I also just came back here from the Northern Stronghold today, you seee. I was thinking I'd go and say hi sometime tonight, but I didn't have the time."

While talking fluently, Captain Sariha slapped his younger brother's shoulder with his right hand. Their physiques were just about the same, but Torway was currently shrinking in on himself like a borrowed cat.[38]

"…Nii-sama, that you were able to return to the capital safely is precious above all."

"No, it was actually incredibly boring over there, ya know. I'm jealous of those guys over at the Eastern Stronghold who got to fight with the Kioka Army. ...Uhh, are you Toruru's friend?"

As he had the conversation turned on him, Matthew nodded reflexively.

"I seee I see. –Ah, I'm called Sarihasrag Remeon- I'm this guy's older brother so far as it goes. That bigheaded-shorthaired fellow is Sushuraf Remeon. Would you tell us your name if that's alright?"

"Warrant Officer Matthew Tetdrich. I'm humbled to meet you, Captain Sarihasrag Remeon-dono.

“Ahhh~ Stop it stop it! You don’t need the Captain, the dono, or my full name, Sariha is fine.”

Huhh- Matthew tilted his head. A too friendly superior was also difficult to handle.

“But hey hey you see~ I also kinda remember your full name, ya know. You’re one of the five guys who saved the Third Princess and received the title ‘Imperial Knight’ aren’tcha? I could recognize Torway and the Igsem’s eldest daughter right off the bat, but I couldn’t put my finger on the names other than those, ya see. Huhh~ I see, so you’re Matthew-kun.”

After scrutinizing Matthew with a shameless gaze, Sariha suddenly raised his head.

“Well, thanks buddy. Thanks a lot. Let me say my thanks as his older brother.”

“…Huh? Uh, no, why?”

“For this and that. He slowed you guys down, am I right? Our little brother.”

Torway’s shoulder shook slightly. When Matthew stood baffled, not understanding what was said, Sariha continued his non-stop one-sided conversation.

“It’s always been that way, ya know. This guy, ya see, he’s weak when it comes to bloodshed or unexpected situations. I don’t know if he cracks under pressure or what, he just becomes completely useless. You guys’d have your hands full just protecting the Princess, so it must’ve been stressful to also bring this kid back safely, am I right? And to think that you’d have been better off tossing him away before coming back, too.”

This time, Matthew was at a loss for words. The taste was too terrible for a joke, but having said that, if it were serious, he really couldn’t believe that those were words an older brother could say in front his younger brother.

“N-no, Torway really did stick it out, you know…? He acted calmly after the ship sunk, and there was the time after that when he fired at a Kioka soldier—“

On the contrary, he remembered how he himself couldn’t move, and as a deep-rooted inferiority complex awakened within him, Matthew’s mouth froze.

Sariha interpreted his silence with a different meaning.

“Really, you don’t need to go that far to cover up for him. I completely understand that this thing shuffles along uselessly. –Do you know? My kid brother, ya see, ‘’can’t land a bullet when the target is close up’’.”

“…Hah? When the target is close up…?”

“He’s okay with the targets used for training, but when the target becomes a moving enemy, he’s completely useless, see? He can’t bring down a rabbit five meters in front of him. He’s a helpless scaredy cat. –Isn’t that right, Torway?”

Torway, with his eyes downward cast, didn't answer. Given how things played out, he didn't have anything to stop Sariha's abusive words.

"This guy can probably shoot the far targets skillfully in training, right? But ya see, at the end of the day, it's still just his desire to be a little farther apart from the enemy. …That's why, Matthew-kun. I'll give you a warning from the goodness of my heart- you should never trust this guy in an actual battlefield. If things take a tiny turn for the worse, there's no doubt he'll abandon his allies, his subordinates, his whatever, and just make a break for-"

''"I'm not making a break for anything!"''

An exclamation similar to a scream came rushing out of Torway's mouth. Then, Sariha, interrupted in the middle of his speech, returned his gaze to his younger brother. His usual friendly smile was now oppositely eerie.

"Hey, Toruru. ''–Just now, I was talking, wasn't I''?"

With just that one phrase, Torway's lips closed a second time. It was a spectacle that showed the power relationship between the brothers.

"Why're you just cutting into the middle of my story? Just who do you think you are? Somebody important?"

"…I-I'm… just…"

"I'm what? What did you say you were? Say it clearly!"

The voice beside him was lighthearted, but strong fear surfaced on Torway's face even though he burst out before. He was completely overpowered. His existence was similar to a piece of stencil work, as if he were being carved with terror of his older brother. –However,

"Oh, I'll say it clearly for you, Sadist Ikemen. I'm uncomfortable just looking at Nii-sama's face. I get a headache just hearing your voice. Compared to Onii-sama, pigs from the livestock pen are much cleaner and more charming. If only Onii-sama weren't alive, the world would be harmony itself. Ahh, Onii-sama, really, it'd be best if your face would explode due to a strange disease of unknown origin as soon as possible."

The atmosphere thickened. Of course Torway's mouth hadn't moved. The insults that seemed to tumble out came down from from above his head.

"According to the Scriptures of Alderah. –Black-hearted ikemen receive no mercy for extenuating circumstances!"

While inventing a proverb, the owner of the voice jumped down from a tree branch. The one who landed right next to the Remeon brothers was a, black-eyed youth with slovenly messy black-hair in an army uniform shirt—it was Ikta Solork hugging his partner, the light spirit Kusu, in both arms.

“I-Ik-kun—Ahh!?”

“I’m tellin’ you not to call me Ik-kun!”

A flick to the forehead bounced off Torway’s brow. On the other side, Sariha squinted and suddenly stared at the intruder.

“…Toruru, is this your friend?”

“You’re wrong, I’m an Imperial Knight who just happens to be passing by. My mission is to return the rampaging ikemen of the world to dust.”

Ikta spouted his nonsense and struck a pose. From those details, Sariha guessed at his scene partner’s identity.

“Imperial Knight… If this guy here is Matthew-kun, I see so that means that you’re Ikta Solork-kun.”

“Silence, Sadist Ikemen. I’m about to puke at that ‘I’m your superior but I’m also friendly, aren’t I?’ aura of yours.”

“Ahaha, that’s harsh. But, well, wait a minute, Ikta-kun. I want to get along with you. I also owe you for taking the trouble to look after my little brother for me, right?”

Seeking friendship, Sariha stuck out his right hand. Then, however, Ikta meaninglessly took on airs after a long pause and pretended to accept the handshake, catching him in his trap. There was a fresh centipede in his closed hand.

“Gyah!? W-wh-wha….!”

“Relax, its head is taken off.”

Ikta stuck out his chest as though this were a professional’s work. As Sariha flung the centipede away and furiously rubb his hand to get rid of the sensation left in his palm, he glared at Ikta charged with hostility.

“…What, you, are you tryin’ to pick a fight with me?”

“More precisely, I’ve been picking fights with all the ikemen in the world since the moment I was born into it.”

“Are you making fun of me? If you’re joking, I’m going to be really angry, ya know.”

When Sariha’s voice took on a menacing tone, even Matthew, who had been spectating their conversation until now, stood up. The other upperclassmen officers followed suit, and before he knew it Ikta was surrounded by five men.

“Apologize. Even now, I’ll forgive you with just an ‘I’m sorry, I got ahead of myself’.”

“Hmph. Among ikemen, there are the ikemen I can forgive, and those who I can’t. Our Torway is somehow or other the former kind, and you are exactly the latter. Dismissal of an intermediate appeal upon the trial of the first offense of your face. Explode without a stay of execution!”

Not a second after Ikta finished his speech in a ringing voice, Sushura’s rock-like fist sunk into his stomach. He fell, buckling at the knees, without even the time to scream, and moreover, Sariha’s kick rushed on to deliver the final blow.

“You’re still a mongrel, you brat. Were you so excited about that conferring of decorations that your brain turned funny? Huh?”

A hard shoe sole tread on Ikta’s temple. The other officers grinned and crowded around Matthew, who moved to interfere.

“Friendship is nice, isn’t it? But I won’t say anything bad so just leave it. When that person[39] snaps, it’s all the same to him. He’ll hit anyone until his head cools down. Just hang here with us. Alright?”

“P-please move aside! Ikta are you okay…!?”

Even when Matthew shouted, on the other side of the human blockade, Sariha’s foot didn’t stop kicking at Ikta. However, his gaze did momentarily shift toward his younger brother, who was standing motionless with a ghastly pale face.

“Look at that, it’s just like I said. His friend’s bein’ beat up right in front of his eyes and he doesn’t even have the guts to get angry at me. He’s nothing more than a coward. I’m telling you he really doesn’t know true friendship, right, Ikta-kun?

“…Ha-haha. Seems like you have triple handicap aside from your face, no? Sadistic, black-hearted, and stupid to boot.”

“What’d you say!?”

“Neanderthals hit when they feel like hitting. Soldiers attack properly when they need to attack. Torway knows the difference between those really well. This is my move- restraining myself and waiting for an opportunity, you see?

“By the way, Captain Sarihasrag. Let me ask you something, do you know the definition of a war of attrition in tactics study?”

“…?”

“It’s ‘avoiding a decisive battle and stalling for time, a battle fought to wait for a chance to come’. Restraining yourself in moments when you just want to charge out is a requirement for great commanders, you see. If people with short tempers like yours are commanders, they’d be drawn by the enemy’s provocations, get completely surrounded when they dash out, then that’s the end of them. Idiots who mistake recklessness for courage and then laugh at other people’s cowardice are ridiculous.”

Sariha became increasingly frenzied and kicked at Ikta, who didn't stop talking even at this point.

"You're gonna lecture me as you grovel on the ground and lick dirt?! How the hell do you explain the current situation with that logic!? You, Imperial Knight-san getting beaten to a pulp after self-importantly giving a speech in the middle of enemy territory!"

"Oof, Gah! …I-I thought of something good. I'll only say it once so listen closely."

"…You're still fucking mumbling?!"

"Ahh, language. Neanderthals hit when they feel like hitting, soldiers attack when they need to attack. …And it's not whether he's an ape or a military man, Ikta Solork is ''saying all he needs to say when he wants to say it!''"

The moment he finished saying that, Ikta turned his face-down body right-side up, and had Kusu, who he'd been shielding and hugging to his chest, fire a High Beam as a counterattack. In addition, having gotten up, he flung sand which he clutched in his palm toward Sariha's blinded eyes.

"…Guahh! Th-this fucker!"

"Alright, the ikemen is making a good face. Let's see, maybe I'll refrain from interfering anymore."

Ikta gloated while brushing the dirt off his clothes. The other four besides Sariha immediately turned and rushed at him, but the youth, without panicking or losing his cool, made and about-face and starting walking,

"And touch. Do your best, Imperial Knight-san."

"I don't know what's going on, but I guess I'll take care of it, Imperial Knight-san."

He clapped hands with his fiery-haired friend who appeared there, and left what was to come entirely in her hands. [40]

"…!? You're… Yatorishino Igsem?!"

Sariha, having brushed the sand from his face, glared at the girl who newly appeared. At the echo of the name he brought to his mouth, Sushura and the other officers showed a glimpse of nervousness. Matthew and Torway's shared the same surprise.

"…Ikta, who are these people?"

"The pleasant brothers of the Remeon Family, and three punks following them."

"Ahh, Captain Sarihasrag Remeon and Lieutenant Sushura Remeon. …I'm pleased to meet you both. I am called Yatorishino Igsem. It is a privilege to make your acquaintance."

She greeted them with a salute saturated with insincerity. Yatori went on before Sariha could say anything.

“From what I saw, it seemed that you were having Ikta from my year act as your sparring partner. With this line up, I’d think you’re ganging up on him in a many-on-one, correct? It looked like rather tough training, though.”

Sariha and the others were left at a loss for words. Understandably, it was difficult to say anything for a lynching as the end result of an argument. Since the justification provided by their scene partner was exactly what they needed, after thinking a little, they nodded vaguely.

“I knew that was it. –Thank goodness. It appears that there’s no need to call an instructor over, Your Highness, the Princess.”

Yatori turned behind her and called out. From the shade of the storehouse building, the form of a small-framed girl bringing along a tall female soldier appeared. Beautiful blonde hair extended to her hips was blown by the wind, and captured the eyes of Sariha and the others.

“Is that so? Then, I am also relieved. To think that interaction between fellow soldiers is so violent a thing.”

Her nobility revealed itself in her gentle tone. The five of them, Sariha and the others, finally realized whose presence they were in.

“W-would you be Her Highness, the Princess…. Th-third Princess Chamille…?”

One of the followers asked with a stiff face. The rumor of a whimsical noble who entered the Military Officer Academy in the same position as an ordinary student had also reached their ears. The princess, standing in line with Haro, made an awkward salute.

“It is as you say, but my current position is a mere Warrant Officer. Excuse me for interrupting your valuable training.”

“N-no, that’s…”

As the five of them were fumbling for words, Yatori made her next move.

“Your Highness, the Princess—No, Warrant Officer Chamille, you shouldn’t apologize. I’m at fault for observing their training from afar and mistaking it for a fight. Would you let me take responsibility?”

“Is that so? If that is what you say then it is well.”

Yatori, authorized by the princess, began walking toward Sariha and the others. Spreading her feet shoulder width apart, she took a firm stance with her center of gravity in her torso.

“Ikta. What are the sparring rules?”

“Hmm… five-on-one down, also a manhunt, I guess.”

“Understood. Then, I, Yatorishino Igsem, shall serve as his substitute for your sparring partner. Please continue.”

“Uh, no, wait just—“

The moment one of the followers choked and stretched out his arm, Yatori dove at his unprotected chest and, not yielding any to any resistance, flung her partner away. The young man, hit the ground on his back with a crash, and, not getting up, opened and closed his mouth like a fish shot out of water.

“W-wait, I-“ “Sparring with a girl—“

The following two also tried to say something or other, but didn’t make it. Two clouds of dust flew up, and the three men who were utterly defeated by Yatori were lying sideways at Yatori’s feet.

Even without the two blades, nearly everyone who saw the Igsem’s cold Close-Quarters Combat Tactic held their breath. Only Ikta casually blew out a whistle.

“…You’re pretty full of yourself.”

Among the remaining Remeon brothers, the one whose fighting spirit ignited was the big-built Sushura. Tossing his large air shooter to the ground, he took a stance to tackle the cheeky daughter of the Igsem Family with all his strength. Yatori also grinned slightly and moved to close the distance between them, but-

“Stop, Sushura! That’s enough!”

Sensing the disadvantage of the situation, Sariha’s roar stopped the two of them on the verge of a brawl.

“…Haha. No, I expect nothing less, Yatorishino-kun. I’m relieved. It seems that even your generation hasn’t lost its touch with the Igsem’s Close Quarters Combat Tactic.”

“No, I am honored. It is no more than a disgrace to your eyes, Maj…. Captain Sarihasrag.”

Noticing the sarcasm in her small slip of the tongue, Sariha clenched his fist while wearing a stiff smile. ...Though Sariha’s rank was Captain, it hadn’t changed for five years. Sarcasm as if to say, “you still haven’t become a Major yet?” was mixed into Yatori’s words.

“…That, that’s enough sparring. Sorry for making you join us.”

Exchanging looks with Sariha, Sushura nodded obediently and picked up the bodies of their followers who were knocked out by Yatori one after the other. Unfazed by the weight of three bodies- this was the fearsome superhuman strength of the second son of the Remeon Family.

“Well then, Your Highness, Princess Chamille, we shall take our leave here. We wish you well.”

The brothers saluted in accordance with etiquette and moved to leave, but the moment they passed Ikta's sideways body, Sariha murmured with all his murderous intent. "…Don't think this is over."

When their two figures disappeared behind a corner, as if his nervousness dissolved at that point, Ikta folded his knees and flopped on his back. Torway was also freed from his older brothers' spell, panicked, and rushed to his friend's side.

"Ik-kun, are you hurt!? Oh god, no broken bones…!?"

"…My stomach hurts...my back hurts…"

With his energy from when he hurled insults at Sariha disappeared somewhere, Ikta whimpered in a weak, tearful voice. Haro immediately came over and began a medical examination.

"…Hm, it's just bruising and internal bleeding. It'll be fine if we just keep it cold. Miru, make some ice."

Being addressed, the water spirit Miru suddenly nodded and spit out three lumps of ice from the 'water spout' in his torso in a size which someone could hold snugly in one hand. She quickly wrapped the lumps, which started melting right from the moment they touched the open air, in bandages and tied them to the especially swollen parts out of the several injured areas.

"You don't need to worry, Torway. Ikta is tougher than he looks."

"That's…, But because of me, he was beat up like that by Onii-sama and the others…"

"…Because of me? Oi, don't go misunderstanding anything, Ikemen. Listen here, I just wanted to get revenge for being disturbed from my sleep by that Sadist Ikemen's annoying voice. You can see my bed up in that tree can't you, look."

When he directed his gaze in the direction Ikta pointed out, there was a commercial-style bed established on a thick branch in a tree 10 meters from the ground. Even his long-time friend Matthew was dumbfounded at this.

"Are you one with the clouds or something….? Don't you think that you're going to fall and die?"

"One point lesson for my buddy Matthew. Ikta is unexpectedly skilled at climbing trees."

"It's not just here, you know. This guy has expanded his nest to the lowest two in the center of the base. …Today I was wondering if he weren't playing hooky from the morning's classroom lecture and sleeping around this area, so I tried stopped by on my way back from training, and sure enough he was."

Yatori sighed. While staring at Ikta, who was whistling innocently, the princess spoke.

"…You picked a fight with your several scene partners exactly because you anticipated that Yatori would move accordingly. You assumed that we would then give our help. Am I correct, Solork?"

“My my… Hey~ Haro, as her senior, would you teach some fine words to the princess who said those things so well?”

“Huh? Umm… I wonder what you mean…. …Ah, some things are better left unsaid?”[41]

The princess’s face reddened at her own correct guess and verbal faux pas, and she fell into silence. Haro, noticing that she made her own error, panicked along with Yatori and tried to cover up for it. Whenever it came to this princess, anything Ikta did turned into bullying.

“Oi, Torway.”

Ikta, resisting the pain and standing up, unexpectedly called the young man in front of him by his name.

“The definition of a war of attrition. Can you tell me?”

“….Uhh…? That is, Ik-kun, you just….”

“Who cares just say it.”

“Y-yea…. It’s ‘avoiding a decisive battle and stalling for time, a battle fought to wait for a chance to come’, right?”

Torway said it word-for-word without hesitation. Ikta snorted and turned his back.

“If you can say it then it’s fine. You’ll be fine later as long as you do exactly that, you see. …Well, that is the hardest thing to do, though.”

Those words pierced harder and deeper into the young man’s chest than their speaker intended.

Interspersed with various accidents such as those, the three month basic training period passed quickly, and at long last Ikta and the others started to receive training as full-fledged military officers.

“The 32 who passed the High Grade Military Officer Exam, listen well! Each and every one of you will now be assigned one at a time to organized Imperial Army platoons of 40 soldiers! Though they may be training platoons, they are full-fledged, legitimate units! Accept this responsibility with care!”

The instructor gave an explanation to the students collected in the plaza. Their hopeful gazes gathered just now.

“The separation of soldiers to each respective Division will differ! Wind spirit holders to the Air Gunner Platoons, fire spirit holders to the Incineration Platoons- each you will mostly be deployed as such. For the sake of command, first get in your head how to tell apart the characteristics of your own unit!”

After continuing to speak about preparedness as a commander for one scene, the instructor finally called out to the soldiers waiting in a neighboring plaza, and began the ceremony of assigning a 40-

soldier platoon to each warrant officer.

The ones with hopes weren't just the warrant officers- it seemed that the privates who would enter under their command were the same, and as the names of the new platoon leaders were being read aloud, they gave small elated or disappointed reactions.

"Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem, I entrust you with the First Training Platoon of the Incineration Division! It is a gateway through which successive generations of Igsems have passed without exception. Show us some masterful leadership!"

"I humbly receive this appointment."

Once Yatori received her commission from the instructor, the soldiers who became her subordinates hailed her with wildly enthusiastic cheers of joy. Even under normal circumstances, the Igsem name was widely known, but in these three months she was evaluated as an excellent warrant officer. Now especially, Platoon Yatori was number one unit in popularity which everyone was dying to enter.

"Warrant Officer Torway Remeon, I entrust you with the First Training Platoon of the Air Gunner Division! It is also the unit formerly commanded by your older brother, Captain Sarihasrag. We're expecting you to become a great commander who won't disgrace the Remeon Family name!

"…I humbly receive this appointment."

He was in a complex mental state after being brought under comparison to his brother, but again Torway was hailed with great cheers of joy from the subordinates who entered under his command. Compared to the appointments of the two names that followed, Matthew and Haro, the difference in heat was clear. Many of the warrant officers couldn't help but feel uneasy- weren't they receiving defective greetings from their precious subordinates?

The Incineration soldiers, the Air Gunner soldiers, the Medic soldiers- Ikta's appointment came around last. The group he was responsible for, being a light spirit holder, was the last Division, which was unpopular with soldiers due the plainness of taking supporting role.

"Warrant Officer Ikta Solork, I entrust you with the Third Training Platoon of the Illumination Division!"

"I humbly receive this appointment."

Ikta answered in a slightly monotone voice. …However, the real show started there.

After receiving his commission, when he walked toward the soldiers with a stupid smile, he was hailed with a frighteningly heavy silence. It wasn't simple disappointment, countless gazes tinged with hostility pierced through his entire body.

"Congratulations on your appointment as platoon leader, Warrant Officer Ikta Solork. Please lead us well."

The female soldier one step forward of her allies' line, contrary to her polite tone, glared at Ikta with harsh eyes from below her hat. She was a little short compared to Haro, but she was still tall at 170 centimeters. Her rank insignia was one for sergeant major. Meaning, it seemed that she was largely serving as the platoon leader until Ikta's appointment. Her age was approximately 20 years, and her partner was of course a light spirit. I would've liked for her to be a bit more ripe, but her sense of worldly wisdom also meets my tastes- thought Ikta absentmindedly.

"No, I look forward to working with you. –By the way, Sergeant Major, your name is?"

Ikta asked innocently enough, but in that moment, her hostility developed into murderous intent.

"…If you want my name, then shouldn't you already know it, Warrant Officer?"

"Huh? No way, have we met somewhere before?"



As Ikta said that, the temperature of the soldiers' gazes around him slowly dropped. Then, her face twitching, the female sergeant major took off her hat and glared at the superior officer in front of her with her newly revealed face.

"I am Sergeant Major Suuya Mittokalif. My partner is the light spirit Yoki. –It's been two years since we've met like this, hasn't it, Warrant Officer Solork? ''In the past, you were quite obliged to my mother.'''"

The sound of her name called up old memories, and Ikta opened his eyes wide. Her face, strong with competitive spirit, was a little less tall before, but her curly brown hair and her freckles remained from the past.

"Suuya Mittokarif…wait, could you be, Amishiya's daughter…?"

As Ikta timidly confirmed it, Sergeant Major suddenly brought her face closer.

"Yes, I am her daughter. –However, Warrant Officer Solork. Would you not use my mother's first name with such familiarity again? Since your social standing is no higher than a married woman's fellow adulterer."

""""The daughter of a past partner in adultery?""""

In the cafeteria where they had gathered for their lunch break, the cast of the 'Order of Knights' were shocked at Ikta's report.

"You say adultery, but my courtship hadn't reached that point yet. Ahh hell- why'd we have to meet again here of all places…?"

"W-wait, Ikta-san, you're 17 right now, right!? I mean, just how old…!?"

Haro hit upon a reasonable question. Ikta folded his arms and thought a little.

"That was when I was in the fourth year of Middle Grade Academy so… 14 years? No, I might actually have turned 15…"

"How old was your partner?! Isn't the daughter in question older than you are!?"

"Ah, I remember that clearly. At that time Amishiya was 42 years old. I wonder if she's doing okay right now."

Matthew opened his mouth in amazement at the details the youth mentioned casually, and even Haro became lightheaded.

"Th-the difference between your ages is 28 years…? That's practically the range for parent and child!"

Yatori, the only one who was not perturbed, caught Haro as she fainted and collapsed in her chair. Next to her, Her Highness Chamille, who ended up imagining the contents of his story in reality, was looking down with a red face.

“Forgetting age, I can’t praise you for coercing your partner into adultery. Don’t tell me you were aware of it when you did it?”

“Of course I didn’t know when I did it. My taste for older women is generally accepted by myself and others, but I don’t make it a habit to steal other people’s wives. Amishiya herself said that she split from her husband, and I was invited to her house countless times, so there’s no way I could have thought she was someone’s wife or anything…”

The story was progressing in an increasingly fishy direction. Her Highness, Chamille’s face was turning scarlet to the point that it seemed steam might come out. The excitement was too strong for a 12 year old girl, but Ikta didn’t care about that kind of thing.

“Ahh, come to think of it, we were at her house when I was exposed…. Suuya[42] came back home without announcing the date. That was a surprise because she got really angry, that girl. First she drove me out, then she cross-examined Amishiya, and she even called back her father from a business trip…it seems they having a big heated discussion and about to attack each other.”

“That’s an example of reaping what you sow. It’s natural for you to be blamed, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’m not making any excuses. Since, when I was called by Suuya after the family council came to a pause, the last thing I was told is, ‘I’ll never forgive you. Don’t show your face in front of my mother again.” I complied with that…but I was relieved that the Mittokalif household survived without disintegrating.”

Ikta, taking a breath and sipping his tea, was faced with cold looks from the formation of females around him. Normally, one would be unable to endure being in the middle of this atmosphere, but he bore it magnificently with seeming nerves of steel.

“Haha… by the way, what am I gonna do? Somehow it seems like this story is widely known among all the soldiers in my platoon, you see. It’s my first day on the job, and it already doesn’t seem like anyone will listen to what I say.”

“Please deal with it yourself. There’s not even a millimeter margin for sympathy.”

Yatori cut him down with a single stroke. Haro and Matthew also nodded wordlessly in agreement.

“My friends are so cold to me…. I got it, okay, I won’t rely on people like you anymore.”

While on the verge of seemingly fake tears, Ikta stood up from his seat with his empty food plate in his hand. Torway and the princess, who’d refrained from commenting until now, promptly moved to go after him, but Yatori stopped them.

“Your Highness, the Princess, please stay as you are. Torway, you, too, please stop going after him.”

“…? Wh-Why, Yatori? Even Solork is strangely troubled…”

“Ever since we first met, I’ve only been helped out by Ik-kun. I also want to be of use…”

“I thought that you two would say that. Helping and spoiling are similar but different, correct? The matter this time is a situation completely brought on by his own carelessness. He has the obligation to deal with it himself, concerning the details of the trouble as well, it’s not something outsiders should stick their heads into.”

The sound logic made the two of them silent. Yatori, seeing their condition, smiled wryly and added a revision.

“…I suppose I phrased it badly. What I wanted to say is that there is simply no need to worry. Well, just see how things go from afar for a little while. You’ll understand the price of worrying soon. –If he’s the type of man who’d be at a loss for a way out in this kind of situation, then Ikta Solork wouldn’t be here to begin with.”

“—Stop! Everyone, left!”

A sharp female voice echoed across the plaza. Under the blazing sun, forty pairs of military shoes forcefully tread on the solid earth, and Platoon Ikta, commanded by Sergeant Major Suuya, continued marching in line.

“Hmm- her skill is decent.”

However, as for the platoon leader who was supposed to be taking command, he was sitting alone on a small hill and watching the condition of his subordinates. This wasn’t his usual laziness, but because he had been boycotted by the soldiers.

“What should I do~?”

Ikta murmured while scratching his head with one hand. As a result of the infamy Suuya popularized, the soldiers’ good will toward him was either zero or in the negatives. Before they started this training, she told him this herself.

“It’s fine if you don’t do anything, Warrant Officer Solork. Since the soldiers will move well enough with my direction.”

It seemed that she had no intention at all of working under her original duty as assistant to the platoon leader. Thus, Ikta had involuntarily become an ornament on a hill. Well, but it’s easy, so this in itself was not too bad.

“Still, considering my position, the minimum is the responsibility to supervise, right… For their sake as well.”

A sigh came out. Ikta was forced to become a soldier against his will as a result of Her Highness,

Chamille's arrangements, but those circumstances had no connection to his subordinates. He was thinking about waiting for an opportunity and escaping the army, but in the time until then, he wanted to at least properly supervise his blameless subordinates.

"…My my. It seems that I have one one-hundred-millionth of the sense of responsibility as Lieutenant General Rikan did."

His heart set with resolution, Ikta lifted his heavy body and came off the hill. –A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Even if progressing to a commanding officer all of a sudden is impossible, today, let's at least somehow progress to a talking ornament.

There were two men with a telescope watching Ikta from afar attempting communication with his subordinates in his natural cheeky manner. A handsome young man with light green hair, and a giant with a height close to two meters. They were the Remeon brothers.

"—Haha, serves you right. Oi, Sushura, can you see this? He's being ignored by the soldiers."

"…"

"How the hell is that mess an Imperial Knight? It's obvious that him crossing the border from Kioka territory and returning alive was just good luck. That guy fucking made me listen to that ridiculous babbling…"

Sushura, as silent as a rock, listened to the abuse Sariha muttered over and over.

…To tell the truth, he wasn't the type to hold a grudge as much as his older brother was, and he had already stopped caring about Ikta. Even for this act which resembled peeping, he was just making his brother look good and tagging along.

"Ahh shit- just remembering it makes me nauseous. That's right, speaking of cheeky, there's also Toruru. It'd be great if he'd just shut up and listen to what I say like he used to, but after hanging out with that weirdo he fucking went and turned rebellious. Now that it's come to this, we gotta get those two and make 'em understand their place, am I right? You're with me on this, right, Sushura?"

"…"

In contrast to Sushura's silence, Sariha went on indefinitely. A senior instructor who casually happened to pass by asked a question to the two of them.

"…Is that Captain Sarihasrag over there? I see, so you've also come back from the Northern Stronghold."

Sariha, addressed in conversation, immediately removed his eye from the telescope and saluted the instructor. When in front of his superior officer, his attitude when badmouthing his sickening scene partners changed completely- his expression tensed and his tone also became courteous.

“It has been a while, Lieutenant Colonel Kuurij. It is good to see that you are unharmed, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Hm, it’s been three years, hasn’t it? First Lieutenant Sushuraf, you’re also putting on a nice face. However, what are you looking at by taking out a telescope?”

“Ha- we were checking the condition of our juniors in the High Grade Military Officer Course. It seems that they just finished their foundational drills and were entrusted with platoons, and as their seniors, we were curious about various things.”

“I see, I’m familiar with that. I also went through some trouble the first time I had subordinates.”

The instructor reminiscing with far off eyes suddenly looked at the Remeon brothers as if he remembered something.

“…That reminds me. You two, if you’re that concerned with your juniors, how about you act as a guide and train them?”

“Hah…? But, we aren’t instructors…”

“No, that’s not it. Even you guys remember, right? After you were entrusted with platoons, practice to cultivate a sense of commanding in an actual battle was held from time to time. They’re sham battles where the exemplars use paint fluid, but how about serving as the new recruits’ opponents? -is what I meant.”

--Sariha widened his eyes, and his jaw hung with joy. This was a godsend.

“Most certainly, I would love to participate. When would the first practice be?”

“It’s about a month from now, but that’s when we’d arrive to the location, and there might be some time until the sham battle. Your unexperienced juniors would surely be anxious. You don’t mind?”

“Not at all- everyone is unexperienced in the beginning. …By the way, are the juniors we would be fighting random?”

“Is there a new recruit you’ve got your eyes on? Certainly, there are a few more interesting ones this year compared to the others. If you have a preference, then say so. I’m sure that they’ll appreciate you participation in their practice.”

Sariha, bestowed with the heaven-sent ability to choose, listed five names without any hesitation. The instructor smiled, showing his teeth.

“Haha, I see. Taking the entire ‘Order of Knights’- you guys have guts, don’t you?”

The instructor didn’t notice the dark sentiment lurking behind Sariha’s fresh smile at all.

A day approximately one month after the warrant officers in the High Grade Military Officer Course were entrusted with platoons.

In the lounge of the barracks, Matthew came gasping to where the five Ikta, Yatori, Torway, Haro, and Her Highness Chamille were polishing their countermeasure against the test that was prodding at their minds. The cast of the "Order of Knight" turned their heads at his clearly panicked acting.

"In such a hurry- what's the matter, Matthew? How about you drink some water and calm down first?"

"I-I apologize, Your Highness, the Princess. Thank you..."

After taking a sake cup from the princess's hand, and draining it in one gulp, Matthew opened his mouth again.

"—Something terrible is gonna happened. I'm not sure we're coming back in one piece…"

"In one piece… s-somehow, that's not very peaceful, is it? What's going on?"

"The program for the practice we're participating in was released on the bulletin board. The date is set for five days from now, but that's not important. The problem is the details. It seems that the six platoons are going to march divided into two groups to the location about 30 kilometers to the southwest of here, then hold a mock battle using paint fluid, but…"

"Marching training and mock battles? It doesn't seem very easy for our first training."

"I'm saying, this isn't the time to be saying such careless things! The six platoons that are going to be split to fight are, on one side mine, Ikta's, and Torway's units! On the other side, Yatori, Captain Sarihasrag, and First Lieutenant Sushura's units!"

Surprise caught them all. Yatori, listed with an unexpected pair, opened her eyes wide.

"What, so I'm alone in a different camp? The Remeon brothers must like me quite a lot then."

"Yatori, that's only just for now. I mean, normally his two older brothers wouldn't even look at you…"

Torway was startled by Ikta's grinning mutter, but fortunately, it didn't reach Yatori's ears. Her personality in front of men was something of her weak point, but somehow she was uninformed about those kinds of niceties.

"But well… obviously it's a lineup to torment the three of us, isn't it? We're all warrant officers on our side, but on their side, two out of three are a captain and a first lieutenant on active duty. They didn't think to make it a fair show?"

Ikta smiled wryly with a defeated face. Matthew couldn't understand how he was so casual.

“I’m saying, this isn’t the time to smile! What the hell are we gonna do about this!? Those two still a have grudge from before! At this rate, we’re gonna be beat up in the mock battle with the practice as an excuse!”

Matthew’s words pierced Torway in the chest, and he, feeling responsible, bit his lip and hung his head.

“I-I’m sorry, because of me… Ahh!?”

Without anyone saying anything, Ikta’s flick to the forehead hit his brow. In addition, he snorted and spoke.

“Hey you’re pretty conceited, Ikemen. Whichever way you think of it, I’m the main target for revenge, and the other two are bonus, right? To be perfectly honest, Matthew just got dragged in.”

“I agree. As the one who interrupted the fight, I might also be responsible for how things turned out. Well, there’s no use talking about it now… Whatever the case, don’t worry, Matthew.”

“But how can you be so calm at a time like this?! If you have any sympathy, find a countermeasure!”

Yatori made a slightly puzzled face at Matthew’s agonizing scream and folded her arms.

“I really do want to, but… in the name of the Igsem Family, this person can’t make any discretions when it comes to military practice. Sorry about you guys, but I’ll be fighting to my full abilities. Though, of course if unreasonable violence occurs in my presence I’ll put a stop to it.”

“We can trust Yatori to be steadfast in her position, can’t we? Well, but I guess it’s fine this way too. For you, it’s also a personal showdown with your long awaited rival[43]. It’s best to ignore other distractions. …By the way, Matthew, Haro’s platoon isn’t participating in practice?”

“The Medics Division is also headed on-site, unaffiliated with any camp, but they’re to provide aid indiscriminately to injured persons from training. No, but Ikta, why the hell are you so relaxed?! Forget other people- now’s when we should worry about ourselves, right?”

“Come on, calm down, Matthew. Our bullying seniors are a little annoying, but this is our first practice. Anything could happen, and whatever happens happens. If we die, we’ll cross that boundary together, okay?”

Making such claims without any kind of support, Ikta suddenly rose from his seat. Bewildered, Torway called out to his retreating figure as he was leaving the lounge.

“Ik-kun, where…?”

“Just turning a crisis into an opportunity. The war of attrition- it’s about time we put that to an end.”

Ikta seemed to leave after leaving those words behind him, but suddenly his face casually poked back through the door and spoke.

“Also, don’t call me Ik-kun.”

On the way back from violent close-quarters combat training. Sergeant Major Suuya Mittokalif, taking a breath after quenching her thirst at a water fountain, was suddenly irritated to her core by a familiar voice echoing from the background.

“Ah- There you are, Suuya. I wonder if you have time right now. Can we talk a bit?”

“…”

“Suuya? Hey~ Suuya, can you hear me? Suuya Suuya Suuya!”

“I can hear you so please stop calling me so many times! Besides, why’re you calling me by my first name and not my family name!?”

“I call girls over-familiarly by their first names even it’s our first time meeting. It’s a fundamental skill for hunters, you know. Depending on the situation, though.”

“Such ridiculous things with a serious face…. Then, please at least call me with my rank.”

“I don’t wanna. Suuya has such a nice ring to it, adding Sergeant Major would just ruin it.”

Ikta spoke seriously. Her fatigue outweighing her irritation with their back and forth until now, Warrant Officer Suuya, not having a choice, decided to hear her scene partner out a little.

“…What do you want, Warrant Officer Solork? It’s no use meddling in commanding the next training, though.”

“No~ that’s actually it though, Suuya, it’s not good if I just keep leaving it to you, see? Maybe it’s about time you let me do it?”

“No, it perfectly fine. I don’t need you to do anything.”

“Ahh, you’re so cold~ Is that because I got along well with Amishiya?”

Suuya’s eyes glared at her scene partner filled with murderous intent. Without even the slightest hesitation, in the same manner as everyday small talk, Ikta desecrated her holy ground.

“…I, told you, didn’t I? Not to say my mother’s name again.”

“You did. But I have no memory of responding with a ‘yes, I understand’. But anyway, answer my question. -Is your not wanting to let me lead the platoon because I had a relationship with your mother?”

Suuya was at a loss for a reply. It was obvious that that was the case, but Ikta also knew that she couldn’t say so. Since acknowledging that would be acknowledging that she was disturbing military

order with personal interests.

“…You’re…wrong. You’re wrong. That is not the reason.”

“Oh? Then why?”

“That, well…Warrant Officer Solork, your stamina is below standard, and you’re weak in both close-quarters combat and marksmanship, and I can’t see you as the type who’s fit to command on-site personally.”

“Hmm… Is that the number one reason?”

“That’s right. I’ll do that sort of thing, so please just relax until my rank becomes higher. The Annals of Military History or the Analysis of Military Tactics- if classroom lectures are your strong point, then isn’t it better if you focus on that area?”

Suuya established a reason after some difficulty. She’s not the verbally fluent type, is she?- Ikta saw through it immediately. Is that truly the reason? In addition to that, he also saw that she had a complex toward academics.

It was a rather underhanded method, but with a scene partner like this, it was incredibly easy to lead the conversation.

“…I’m going to change the topic just a bit. Suuya, you know that there’s practice in five days?”

“Huh? Ah, yes, I saw the announcement this morning. It seemed like marching training and a mock battle…”

“Right, about that mock battle, see. Are you confident you can win it?”

Without giving her a chance to think, Ikta added to his question. Suuya, taking her time, was hard-pressed for an answer.

“…That… of course, I’ll give it my best, but…”

“You’ll win if you give it your best?”

“…No. I hate to say it, but I think it’ll be difficult. There is too big of a difference in the strength between our camps. Captain Sarihasrag and First Lieutenant Sushura are officers on active duty, and there’s the rumor that Warrant Officer Yatorishino has the top grades this term.… It’s great that Warrant Officer Torway is in our camp, but there’s no saying that the last one, Warrant Officer Matthew, is outstandingly excelle…”

“I see. So it’s impossible for your leadership to reverse the disadvantage.”

After forcing the conversation to a pause by rephrasing in a way that refused objection, Ikta waited for the right time and made his move.

“Well then~ If we win the mock battle under my command, I wonder if that means I’m a better commander than you are?

“—Huh? Th-that’s…”

“That’s what it means, right? Since I’ll be doing something that you can’t. At the very least, you’ll have to revise your evaluation that I’m not ‘fit to command on-site personally’.”

Suuya panicked. Finally, after coming this far, she realized that she had been led by the nose. She wanted to get angry, but since she took part in the conversation, she couldn’t backtrack.

“…If, you win the mock battle, and, Warrant Officer Solork, if you had a big part in the victory…”

“You’ll allow me to command the platoon?”

“…That’s fine. …But- But! Warrant Officer, if you lose!?”

For Suuya, who strong point wasn’t eloquence, this was the best comeback she could muster. While finding her earnestness charming, Ikta brought the words his companion was hoping he’d say to his mouth.

“In that case, it’s exactly as you said- I shall then rethink my future and devote myself to the desk job I’m more suited for. From then on, I won’t say another word about your continued use of the platoon. …Is this fine?”

Ikta confirmed, and Suuya nodded clearly. When he saw that his companion wagered her pride and went along with his idea, the youth smiled, satisfied for the time being,

“Certainly we’ve made a deal. Now then, from today until the end of the practice, I shall take charge of the Third Training Platoon of the Illumination Division. As you’d expect, I need a few days at least to warm up- no complaints, right?”

“…Understood. As you wish.”

“Let the soldiers hear it from you to follow my orders. They should accept it if you tell them our terms from earlier. If that doesn’t get through to them, then of course the deal is off. I’m looking forward to it.”

Firmly pushing his demands, Ikta finally took his leave of Suuya’s presence. --The stage was set- it was still too early to make that declaration. That expression is reserved for those who actually have confidence in their victory.

Ikta Solork's Science of Laziness

The first day of the practice, in which the seven platoons consisting of over 270 soldiers would participate, began amidst gales of wind and torrential rain.

“What is this? It sucks. It ruins the idea of ‘a fun picnic with everyone’, doesn’t it?”

Even though not complaining was an important principle for commanders, Ikta made these idle complaints just before their departure. Even Sergeant Major Suuya, who’d promised to be wholly cooperative just this once, was about to instinctively object to it.

“I guess it’s fine- if you think about it, this is better than if it were hot. –Other platoons, are you ready yet?”

Matthew and Torway, commanding their respective platoons, and Haro as well, responded from the back. In the conclusion of these four’s prior conversation, the role of supreme commander would be entrusted to Ikta, who was at the vanguard. Since the soldiers thought no doubt that Torway was their only option, they were incredibly dissatisfied on the inside.

“Then, we’re departing. We’re going…hey, all four platoons, it’s a downpour!”

With that lazy signal, their march began. Countless military boots trampled on the muddy ground, and the soldiers burdened with heavy knapsacks endlessly traversed the plains. With things like rations, first aid kits, sleeping bags, and arms for the mock battle, each person’s baggage attained a gross weight of 30~40 kilograms, and the weight of each and every step they made wasn’t even worth comparing to when they were empty handed.

“Our destination is 30 kilometers to the southwest. Assuming we stop and set up camp once, can we estimate our arrival to be around the afternoon of the next day?”

Suuya meant to make a completely ordinary confirmation, but Ikta tilted his head with a puzzled look.

“? No, we’ll be setting up camp on-site by the time the sun sets. Plus, I want to use tomorrow morning for a rehearsal.”

Troubled for a while at his words, Suuya then huffed a magnificent sigh. –It’s no use. This man doesn’t understand the slightest thing about what a ‘march’ is.

“…Umm, you see, Warrant Officer. I don’t know where the idea that it’s okay to smile is coming from, but first things first. 30 kilometers until our destination is simply the absolute distance, you know. Of course, the path isn’t stretched in a straight line. Therefore, the distance we’re walking in actuality is much longer. Do you understand that?”

"Um, yea."

"Don't just say, 'um, yea'. Next, the second thing- it's very difficult to walk in unfamiliar territory with just a map. First, as strangers to the land, we're going to get lost, and it's not rare for the map itself to have errors. We're going to take more and more time as we correct them."

"Well, yea."

"No, we don't need a 'well, yea'. Finally the third thing, in this bad weather, the march is going to be slower whether we like it or not. 'Let's establish a time of arrival taking into account these all these factors', is what I was trying to say before!"

"I was also considering those things when I made my estimate though…Umm, for the time being, could I have you not yell so much? I just think that if the soldiers will get worried if they hear us arguing so soon after we departed."

A sound argument came from him despite the fact that he seemed to be losing their quarrel, and Suuya faltered. Ikta, not saying any more in particular, began talking with the light spirit Kusu in his hip pouch possibly as a diversion from the long journey.

"Kusu, shall we play shiritori?[44] Nitpicker~" "Ruins" "Stubborn daughter~" "Reef" " Fixated on the past~" "Tape" "Ethically narrow-minded~" "Disc" "Could even call her my step-daughter" "Reflex" "X? [45] …Umm- Nope, I can't think of anything. Ahaha, it's my loss because of my theme restriction~"

Ikta laughed and stroked Kusu's head. Firmly repressing her desire to retort with "What theme?!", Suuya already resolved to not make a single suggestion. –This type of person, he'll just get what's coming to him.

However, unrelated to Suuya's spiteful hopes, there was something strange going on with her superior officer from the start.

When several hours passed since they departed, all the units had deviated slightly off-course, and had entered a small road under Ikta's command. They were on an old mountain path with barely any signs human traffic, and it was possible for them to return back to the correct path if they shifted to the side of the road, but, of course, that was still a detour.

Thinking he showed his incompetence, Suuya had been gloating on the inside until now. However, Ikta's next command flippantly exceeded her expectations and common sense.

"Cease marching. –So, listen well, okay? Those in front of me, without breaking file, open your knapsacks while standing. Torway, Matthew, Haro, do just as we planned!"

The soldiers complied with the orders even while tilting their heads in confusion. When everyone's knapsacks were open excluding the last column, Ikta gave the next command without a moment's

delay.

“Well then, take out whatever I say and leave it at your feet. First, one canister of paint fluid for the mock battle, six pegs for securing the tents, then—“

The things they pulled from their knapsacks continued piling up at their feet. At this point in time, Suuya was in disbelief.

“You took out everything I said, right? Good, with that, using the tent lining which you took out last, roll up the rest of the items. Also, last file, about face! Those people directly in front of them, as soon as you finish with the work you’re doing now, also do the same thing with the bags of the person in back of you.”

As the result of his commands being free of any pointless rambling, all of the work was finished before three minutes passed. Confirming that, Ikta lightly nodded his head and turned on his heel. And gave orders while facing forward.

“All troops, shift five steps to the left. –Good, resume marching.”

“Wai- Warrant Officer…!?”

While leaving behind one portion of their materials, the four platoons resumed marching. Suuya at her superior officer in a crazed rush.

“What are you thinking just randomly discarding our things?! This is clearly a violation of military command!”

“Discarding is disgraceful- this is depositing, you see. As per our plan of action, we’re taking only necessary materials along the course of our trip. We’ll retrieve it properly on the way back.”

“I can’t sit quiet with that kind of reasoning! Are you planning to speed up the march by lightening their load!? Let’s just say that works, what are you going to do if the things you discard end up being necessary?!”

“I said, not discarding but depositing…. Anyway, I actually chose things that we won’t become necessary in the future. We can use paint fluid diluted with water. For the tent, just the outer layer is enough for keeping out wind and rain. We’re also fine with just the minimum number of pegs necessary for securing them.”

While impatiently wiping a raindrop from his face, Ikta lowered his voice and continued.

“…Essentially, with the details of the practice, being overburdened with our full equipment isn’t a good thing. There’s no need for us to be pointless exhausted as a result of materials we won’t even use. You think so too, right?”

“But the leaders decided the contents of our equipment, so—“

"Yes, we're depositing them, aren't we? Even if we were discarding them, the management of materials falls under the on-site commander's jurisdiction, you know. Besides, at any rate, the responsibility for this order is mine alone. I'm the one who'll be scolded by the higher-ups and making explanations. You don't need to worry."

Ending the conversation one-sidedly, Ikta yawned as he continued walking. Suuya, once again prevented from making an objection, suppressed her frustration and follow after him.

About when an additional three hours passed, in the middle of a road caught between cliffs on both sides, Ikta suddenly stopped in his tracks. Ikta anxiously looked around, but the others couldn't quite understand what he was bothered about.

"…Is something wrong? Did you lose confidence in the way we're going?"

Next to him, Suuya asked sarcastically. But, not answering her, Ikta muttered to himself after surveying the surrounding terrain until he was satisfied.

"—This road is no good."

"Huh?"

"Shall we go back? Alright, all troops change course!"

Suuya couldn't hide her confusion at her superior officer, who was starting to turn back on the road they came without the slightest regret. Even if he noticed that they were going the wrong way, even if that were the case, then it'd be normal to pull out a map to confirm their route.

However, before even five minutes had passed after he started to turn back, Suuya grasped the youth's intention. Unexpectedly, an underground tremor came rumbling toward them. When the surprised soldiers looked behind them, they found before their eyes the sight of the road, just ahead of where they'd been walking until a short time ago, buried by an enormous amount of rock and sand.

"Wha-"

Suuya shivered with the other soldiers. –If they had continued as before, they probably would have been caught in it!

"Alright alright, don't stop your feet."

Ikta clapped his hands and pushed the backs of the soldiers who stopped walking out of surprise. Hearing that, each of the platoons panicked and resumed marching, but Suuya couldn't comprehend the youth's composure at all.

"…Did you know?"

"Hm?"

"Don't play dumb. I mean, that a landslide would happen there."

When Suuya keenly questioned him, Ikta smiled vaguely and tilted his head.

"Well, I'm not a fortune teller. I can't gauge the timing of when it'll happen, but I somehow get the feeling that it's dangerous around here. You didn't notice the condition of the cliff before?"

"The cliff…? What do you mean?"

"First, there were newly revealed rock beds in here and there. It's proof that the earth has started to wear down from the rain. Next, there were several trees angled downward growing from the cliff wall. Usually, on however steep a slope they grow on, trees grow heading upwards, you see, so that signified that the rock bed itself was loose."

Suuya widened her eyes. Despite seeing the same scene, she had completely failed to notice those signs.

"Based on that, the circumstances were sufficient to be on lookout for a landslide. Therefore, we be prudent and turn back. –Does this answer your question?"

It was all Suuya could do to quietly nod at Ikta's words. It was just common sense at work- at any rate, there was no doubt that he would show his incompetence. She couldn't go on without saying that to herself.

"Ahh, we finally arrived. Alright, everyone, we're taking role. When that ends, we're setting up tents and taking a meal!"

The soldiers were starting to bustle around with a sense of liberation at being able to end their march, but Suuya alone was in a daze.

If one looked through the tree branches at western sky, the clouds covering it were still brightly dyed with the orange of the sun.

The rain, after passing a moment's peak, turned into a small drizzle, and the leaves of the various trees provided shade for them even now as they entered their wooded destination.

"…To think, we really arrived before the sun set…"

"I told you, didn't I? I made my estimate having properly accounted for everything."

Ikta spoke while wringing his sopping wet overcoat. Suuya glared at him with a dissatisfied expression.

"…Have you come here before?"

"Nope, it's my first time."

“That’s a lie. I mean, Warrant Officer, you didn’t pull out the map even once on the way. That, and you didn’t even use an actual surveying instrument. Under those conditions, it’s impossible to travel the shortest distance unless you remembered by experience.”

Suuya insisted, following her own common sense. Ikta cracked his shoulders, which were stiff from the weight of his bag.

“I don’t know whether that was the shortest distance, but I paid attention to eliminating waste. Taking out the map in the middle of that rain would be a serious hassle, so confirming the path with it would be a two-fold loss. Those points being, the map in my head wouldn’t get wet, and there’s no work involved in taking it out.”

“Are you saying that you came with the whole thing memorized? …Even if that’s true, there are discrepancies here and there between the map and the actual terrain. At those times, if you don’t have experience, you can’t correctly make the judgment to correct the route.”

“Oh, I have experience. I was taught from my teacher from when I was younger. Since, fieldwork is the foundation of science.”

Science- having never heard such a word, Suuya tilted her head. While giving that girl a sidelong glance, Ikta, wiping the moisture off his skin with a towel, raised his voice slightly and called the leaders of each of the troops.

“Matthew, Torway, Haro- first, thanks for your hard work. There’s no one missing from your troops?”

“Everyone’s where they should be. We arrived before it got dark, and not a single person got lost on the way.”

The other two seconded Matthew’s response. Ikta nodded with satisfaction.

“Everything is according to plan so far. But, the real test has yet to come. –Listen well, Matthew, Torway. Since they are coming by a different route, the arrival of Yatori’s group will take place after noon tomorrow, even if they are early. The time until then is the biggest advantage that has been given to us. Let’s make the most of it.”

“U-umm- I…”

“You’re fine, Haro. You sleep early with your subordinates. Since your Medics troops are in neutral standing, starting tomorrow, you’ll be moving around separate from my command. –Ah, if sleeping by yourself is lonely, then come to my tent?”

“N-no, I’d like to protect my virtue, so I’ll decline…”

“I understand. By the way, I’ll be lonely sleeping by myself, so can I go to your tent in the middle of the night?”

"Ikta… when Yatori's not here, you really let loose, don't you?"

Matthew took on a defeated face, and next to him, Torway unintentionally smiled. After making two~three additional confirmations, the warrant officers separated.

"Sergeant Major Suuya. You can do this once you've finished eating, but would you pick five~six energetic people from among the light spirit holders in our platoon?

Suuya, who had been watching their activities absentmindedly, came to her senses when she was addressed by Ikta in conversation.

"Ah- yes, I understand…. Are you going on a preliminary inspection at night?"

"Well, I did say that we're going to make the most of it. We're just going to take a look at the river in the south. Because tomorrow, we're planning to set up camp on the beach opposite and wait for the enemy."

Ikta spoke about the matter innocently, but Suuya frowned and asked a question in response.

"The beach opposite the river in the south…? J-just wait a minute, Warrant Officer. That's not the place where we're confronting our opponent's army. Didn't you see on the bulletin board that it was designated as the open area in the north?"

"I saw it, but it was just written as 'suitable for merging forces', you know. It was never said that we had to fight there. Upon interpretation, we should be allowed to take up camp anywhere in these Southern Urt Woodlands."

"Yes, but by custom, that…"

"If it were a real battle, we wouldn't be doing things based on custom, you know. Since we have the freedom of choice, we might as well pick a battleground that will work to our advantage, no? -Well then, I'll leave the selection of soldiers to you."

Ikta left without any time to stop him. …Suuya herself still didn't realize that she was getting drawn into his pace more with each passing moment.

After dinner, traveling together with seven soldiers including Suuya, Ikta went to see the condition of the Kuriri River which flowed through an area about one kilometer south of the campground. This place was roughly the southern tip of the Urt Woodlands which had been designated as the location of the practice.

"Oh, the flow is wider than I thought. I didn't think that it was much more than a small river, but the rain has proved fortunate, hasn't it?"

"Huhh…"

Even the other soldiers including Suuya understood some of Ikta's intention as he walked around

muttering. The battle lineup with a river cutting through the space between them and the enemy army was suited for a defensive battle. That in itself might be the right choice. However…

"The water volume is increased, but even still, they could wade across this river if they submerge themselves to the bottom of one's chest. …Checking with the map, there is a sandbar by which they could cross even more easily upstream."

"The river's width is one so that it's possible they might think to attack by crossing the river, isn't it? The flow isn't that strong either, and it seems like by tomorrow, it will become even slower where the rain is weak."

While illuminating it using Kusu's Lantern, Ikta cautiously submerged himself in the river and confirmed the depth of the entire river. Its flow being no exception to that of other slow rivers, the water of the Kuriri River was quite muddy. Even considering that it was natural owing to it being nighttime now, it seemed that it would be difficult to see through the middle of the water even in broad daylight.

"Hmm, I've got a general idea of the middle of the river. What's left is the surrounding terrain, but…"

Ikta, having risen from the water, this time entered the trees around the river and began glancing around the area.

"As expected, the majority of the vegetation is different from the tropics of the Eastern Province. ...Hmm? This…"

He suddenly illuminated the tree which caught his eye from top to bottom with Kusu's High Beam. It was a tall tree with a total height of about 20 meters, but other than that, it didn't have any special characteristics. Behind him, his subordinates quickly shifted their interest elsewhere.

"..It's an Isu tree. Wow, so they grow around here, too!"

However, the same tree before Ikta's eyes was also visible to the others. Letting his joy show in his voice, he lightly hit the trunk with his fist, then directed the High Beam around it as if he were looking for something.

"Alright, they're growing en masse in this area…. Ah, how lucky."

"Umm, Warrant Officer… What could it be that you are so overjoyed about?"

"I've decided on a definite battle strategy. Ahh, thank goodness- with this, it seems like I can sleep well tonight."

Ikta headed back, almost skipping as if to say, "Well then, let's sleep, shall we?" Turning to his flustered subordinates, he spoke in a bright voice.

"Everyone, we're sleeping early today. Early tomorrow morning, we're starting our carpenting work."

Taking a different route than Ikta's group but headed for the same location, Sariha, Sushura, and Yatori's three platoons, just past noon on the day following Ikta's arrival, finally reached the Southern Urt Woodlands.

"Now then, set up camp. No need to be nervous, seeing as our opponents couldn't have arrived yet anyway."

Captain Sariha, stationing his soldiers across the open area in the north, couldn't have thought even in his dreams that his opponents arrived earlier than himself. And he had proper justification. When he did the same practice as a warrant officer when he was younger, he had the experience of using both routes.

"This route is a little longer, but the path is simple and one won't get lost. In comparison, that route might be shorter, but one has to overcome complicated forks and terrain. Hehehe, if it's his first time, he's getting lost…it's complicated enough that people get lost during the journey and have to double back. You think he'll arrive here in one piece?"

Accompanied by the silent Sushuraf, Sariha was filled with self-satisfaction. It seemed as if the words pride and carelessness existed to describe his current state.

Of course the person himself didn't realize it, but it was a different story for outsiders with an objective perspective.

"Captain Sarihasrag. Would it be alright if I sent scouts from my platoon?"

Yatori, who had quickly finished stationing her soldiers, requested that permission from the head commander. Interrupted just as he entered a good mood, looked at her with irritation.

"…Scout? What're ya sayin', we don't need anything like that. They shouldn't have arrived yet, and both armies are supposed to confront each other here anyway, aren't they?"

"On the bulletin board, it said that it was 'suitable for merging forces'. In my case, I wouldn't interpret that to be a designation of our place of confrontation."

"…That was what was there, but for a first practice, he wouldn't be that attentive to detail, right? He would be so exhausted by the time he gets here that he'd probably have no energy left for the mock-"

"Even so, we aren't being cautious."

"…I understand. Do what you want."

Becoming annoyed, Sariha gave his permission not with firm support but to drive her away. The fiery haired girl, saluting then leaving her superior's presence, returned to her own troops and briskly gave

a command.

“Scouting Unit, listen up. First, head straight down south. Look for signs of the enemy while returning north from there.”

At the command of their esteemed platoon leader, her subordinates nodded obediently. Platoon Ikta couldn’t even hold a candle to her troops when it came to their high morale.

“By my guess, our opponents’ forces have already made their arrival. Judging from Ikta’s… their supreme commander’s character, he probably wouldn’t want clash head-on, and if he avoids the open area in the north when setting up camp… then he’ll likely be here.”

Yatori’s fingertip pointed to a point on the map, the Kuriri River of the Southern Urt Woodlands. The three of her subordinates who understood her intentions saluted with vigor and promptly started sprinting south.

“Those were precise orders, Yatori. Is reading Solork’s thoughts a specialty of yours?”

Unexpectedly addressed from the background, Yatori saluted as she turned around. Protected in her vicinity by over 20 brawny bodyguards, it was the girl of the Imperial Family, Her Highness, Chamille.

“I am much obliged, Your Highness. …However, truly it must be impossible to completely read Ikta’s thoughts.”

“Even for you, who has known him for such a long time?”

“’’Even for me… Because it is I’’…no, likely it is both. He definitely thinks while reading how his opponent will predict his thoughts. If you interact him with the intention of keeping secrets, then you will find yourself in dire circumstances.”

He’s a troublesome man- the princess smiled bitterly. Yatori also smiled lightly, and suddenly changed the topic.

“By the way, thank you for today. You especially came to observe our practice.”

“Only to keep watch so that Captain Sarihasrag and Lieutenant Sushura don’t use the mock battle as an excuse to perpetrate violence. You are my Knights. As I had been protected, I will protect you.”

“I am greatly obliged to your kindness. …But, once the fighting begins, however slight the chance, again please remove yourself so you aren’t involved. Be cautious of stray arrows, and always stay behind them.”

Yatori spoke while motioning to the bodyguards with her eyes. Recruited from the soldiers who were permanently stationed at the center base, they were superior soldiers excellent in both physical appearance and physique. Each of them was equipped with an air shooter and light armor; they were fit to be called an iron fortress.

"I understand. For them to fulfill their role, I must also not carelessly expose myself, correct?"

"Then I shall also keep in mind my role of trusting that you'll not carelessly expose yourself."

Exchanging a friendly banter, the two of them, lord and retainer, unintentionally smiled. …However, the footsteps of the scouts who were dispatched earlier returning back at full speed destroyed the peaceful atmosphere.

When he heard the report that the enemy troops had already deployed their camp on the opposite side of the Kuriri River, Captain Sarihasrag was dumbfounded for a few seconds, and finally returned to himself after having his shoulder whacked by his younger brother, Lieutenant Sushura.

"A-all troops proceed south! Return to column formation and head to the Kuriri River!"

They also had the option of waiting as they were in the open area, but if they didn't confront their army and thus reached a stalemate, Sariha would lose face as the commander who was scared by his trainee opponents. Since he was higher in both social class and rank, he had no choice but to defeat Ikta no matter where he was waiting.

"N-no big deal. Once the soldiers return to their columns, they won't be scared as they head from the open area to the river. They think that the start of the fighting will come after they confront the other army. For this at least, there is no room for a weird, far-fetched interpretation-- right, Sushura!?"

The voice that sought reassurance from his younger brother was shrill and nervous. As she heard this from a removed location, Yatori felt exasperated. –The mock battle hasn't so much as started yet- wasn't it a bit too early for their pretense to start coming off?

As he listened to Sushuraf's sounds of agreement Sariha slowly regained his composure. When he faced the enemy troops on the other side of the Kuriri River, he had somehow recovered a dignified expression.

"Did they really set up camp on the other side of the river…? And their troops have completely finished deploying- shit, how did they move this fast?"

Sariha bit his thumbnail with frustration. In front of his eyes, the enemy troops had already raised their battle flag. If they answered this with their own flag, then that moment would mark the start of the fight.

"Argh, they raised their flag first! That alone is enough of a disgrace- we're also deploying immediately!"

The soldiers, pressured by their commander, panicked and rearranged from a column formation to a formation meant for battle. When that finished, Sariha immediately made them raise their battle flag. One couldn't blame Yatori for having a headache.

“I supposed there’s no helping that he is flustered by this…. Though, he’s already fallen behind, so it’s better if he sets up camp at his leisure to make the enemy impatient. This is just what Ikta expected, you know.”

Keeping that opinion to a mutter in her mouth- though she knew her place far better than Ikta did- Yatori’s frustration grew stronger.

Utterly ignorant of his subordinate’s mental state, Sariha thought only of how to defeat the opponent in front of him.

“If our troops are equally matched than naturally, it’s the loss of the side which attacks first in a river defense encampment…. Soldiers who cross the river would be subject to a volley of shots while in a defenseless state. Neither side wants to attack, so this becomes a standoff.”

“Older brother, how about having the soldiers test the depth of the water first? The situation changes depending on the depth of the river.”

“No, there’s no need for that. I know this river well. Normally, one could cross with one’s body submerged to the waist, but it’s currently swollen with rain, so it’d be approximately just below the chest…”

Saying that, Sariha resentfully looked down on the muddy river surface. …The possibility that this river wouldn’t function in a river defense encampment was denied by his own experiences. Therefore, things immediately became troublesome.

“…If I remember correctly, there is a sandbar upstream. We take our troops around and attack the enemy from behind, an offensive matching our timing with the main force… is what first comes to mind. But seeing as we’ve set up camp here, our opponents have probably also read this much…”

No matter which move he made, there was risk involved. That kind of mindset was one of unintentionally waiting for the opponent’s move. Sariha didn’t need a long time to enter that state, and the enemy on the opposite shore read that completely and mobilized their troops.

“…Older brother. One of the enemy units has broken off of formation and seems to be headed upstream.”

“I can see that! Is that Ikta Solork’s unit!? If that’s his game, alright then…!”

With the long-awaited action of the enemy, Sariha leapt like a baited fish at the provocation.

“Warrant Officer Yatorishino! Lead your platoon to the river crossing site upstream, and ambush the enemy there!”

Thus ordered, Yatori avoided making an immediate reply, and hesitated slightly before returning her opinion.

“…I mean no disrespect, Captain. I think that it is dangerous to divide our forces here. If that is what

we will do, wouldn't you rather avoid a confrontation at the river and return to the open area in the north?"

"…Dangerous? What greater danger is there than being completely surrounded by the enemy!?"

"Platoon Ikta is an Illumination Unit. There are few powerful air gunner soldiers in its composition, and its main armaments are the bow gun and the short spear. The effect of their dazing by means of a High Beam is also reduced by half in the afternoon. When they come by circling around upstream, we can counter before we are taken by their pincer attack. …What I'm concerned about now is, whether what they are wishing for might be our response to their invitation?"

Sariha laughed at Yatori's cautious theory.

"Hmph- Has the daughter of the Igsems lost her nerve? Take a good look, there's a river dividing the space between us and the enemy. Even if we are charged with twice the amount of troops, it's our victory just by ambushing their troops."

"It seems that you have forgotten, but this river defense encampment is ''something that the enemy has prepared.'' By no means is it your plan, Captain. No matter what the circumstances, isn't thinking that it will be equally advantageous for us asking too much?"

"…! N-nonsense- don't defy your superior's orders! Go to intercept them immediately!"

When conversation was denied, Yatori naturally gave up on any further persuasion. She faced Sariha with a salute and accepted her order, then took her subordinates from her platoon and began the migration upstream.

"…That direction doesn't count as either offense or defense. Our Captain, judging from his face it seems he's already completely reached a point where he can't think of anything but temporary solutions. --Ahh, good grief. From your perspective, he's certainly an easy piece to push around, isn't he, Ikta?"

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Over 20 minutes after Platoon Yatori departed. Both armies continued to glare at each other across the river, but when for some reason the moment metallic sounds came ringing from upstream, Matthew was the first to change his expression.

"…That's the sign. –All soldiers, prepare your arms."

The soldiers simultaneously inserted a bullet into their air shooters. Of course since this was a mock battle, they were paint balls fired by increased air pressure. The same dye was applied to bow gun arrows, wooden bayonets, and short spears with their tips removed. People smeared with these colors were treated as "killed in action," and couldn't engage any further combat.

"Alright—are you listening? ''We're coordinating with Platoon Ikta when we launch the attack.''"



Matthew's mouth named a platoon that shouldn't have been in the area. Seeming to have been transmitted to the opposite shore as well, the deployed soldiers sharpened their vigilance. –And the next moment, that incident came crashing down on them like a surging wave.

First, having earlier pretended to head upstream but turning back midway, then concealing in the forest by the riverside until now, Platoon Ikta came running out with weapons in hand. Among them was Ikta Solork himself.

The moment their vanguard lined with their own, Matthew and Torway's platoons also fiercely faced the river once more and began attacking. Sariha's troops on the other shore wore dumbfounded expressions. Why you ask, ''that's because Ikta and the others had crossed the Kuriri River, whose depth currently rose to just below one's chest, at most soaked no higher than their knees!''

"Wha…!? F-fire! Attaack!"

Sariha's order, which resembled a shriek, echoed across, but at that point the majority was decided.

The defensive river encampment being advantageous for the side meeting the enemy is due to the fact that it can attack while the soldiers coming from the center of deep water are defenseless and exposed. However, with a water depth below the knees, that effect is weak. Because Platoon Ikta, which was led into the forest, was furthermore added to the attack, of course a difference in war potential in the three platoons vs. two platoons battle also arose.

In part due to the surprise of receiving an impossible attack, Captain Sariha's units couldn't muster a proper retaliation. The soldiers in the front row fired paint balls and paint arrows, forming a "line of battle," and, receiving an attack made with bayonets and short spears one after the other, they were completely driven into a corner from the stalemate.

"R-retreat! Fire while retreating!"

They were destroyed by the volume of fire once they were struck directly- that being said, even as they turned around and retreated, they were annihilated by their continued pursuit. Sariha was at wit's end when he gave the command, but it could also serve well as humor.

"Wha… watch it, you're in my way! If you're 'killed in action' then move already!"

"Y-yes, but still…"

In the front line, which was a jumble of enemies and allies, the living and the dead jostled one another. If people were really killed in action, then one would just need to step over the dead bodies, but in this case they were only dead according to the rules. In part due to their inexperience with mock battles, they ended up as obstacles by standing upright in that area.

"N-now- shoot while the enemy is stopping!"

Taking advantage of the fact that the bullets were paint balls, Sariha, not caring whether they struck his allies, had the soldiers stage a comeback and fire their air shooters. It was a dreadfully shameful

sight, but the short time they gained from it became what allowed them to survive. Even so—

"Oh, come on- I knew it would turn out like this! Platoon, attack! Please protect your fellow troops as they're retreating!"

Slipping through the spaces between the gradually retreating soldiers, the members of Platoon Yatori, which had run into a predicament, returned fire on the enemy. Having previously anticipated a free-for-all fight, Yatori armed her soldiers' bow guns with insertion-style short spears from the beginning. With the enemy in front of their eyes and noses, long things were stronger than both air shooters and bow guns.

"So you did come, Yatori. –Alright, everyone take it easy and rotate! End of swordplay!"

If not for her interference, their rout would've been the perfect chance, but Ikta wasn't mistaken in the least in the moment he chose to pull back. Calmly distancing themselves from the short spear-wielding soldiers of Platoon Yatori, they targeted and completely surrounded their opponents, who had carelessly rushed out. Seeing this, Yatori, also sensed a favorable opportunity.

"Platoon, change course! We can't go straight back- please escape to the forest while the enemy is still disorderly!"

Platoon Yatori's movements were so precise and quick that one couldn't believe that they'd only trained for one month, Just now it seemed that they had scattered and fled, but there was no doubt that they had established a meeting place.

"Ahh- we're were shaken up more than I expected. Hey, Matthew, where are you~? Are you still alive~?"

Ikta called out in a trailing voice, and a short time later a large body appeared from the mass of people.

"I'm here… and I'm alive somehow. I tried to shoot Yatori earlier, but instead I was shut down, though…"

"Ahh well, that's because our center was under attack. I don't think that Yatori's attack was directed towards foot soldiers. Well, I thought we did enough damage to their main forces. For the time being, shall we collect the survivors and reform our ranks?"

Nodding together, the two began to rebuild their own platoons. However, at that time, Sergeant Major Suuya, who survived without being "killed in action" came running, and exploded at Ikta as he was casually counting the number of soldiers.

"Warrant Officer, why didn't we go in pursuit of them!? Warrant Officer Yatorishino's platoon even withdrew- if we're going to chase and beat the confused main forces of our enemy, then that was a perfect chance just now!"

"Huh? You guys are able to carry out a pursuit?"

Ikta asked back with a blank face. Losing her patience at this, Suuya unthinkingly started to raise her voice, but when she was on the verge of actually opening her mouth, she came to a sudden realization about what her superior was saying. When she calmly surveyed her surroundings, the situation was clear. The ranks of the soldiers, who were shaken in the fighting, were thrown in complete disarray, and voices calling for missing allies were echoing from here and there. In the center, there were injured persons in need of medical attention, and it would probably still take some time for each of the platoons to adequately regain order.

There was no way they could carry out an effective pursuit in these conditions. If they acted rashly, they would encounter return fire. Not getting drunk on his plan's success, Ikta had calmly made this judgment. Even Suuya wasn't unable to acknowledge its justification.

In the first place, the delay in recovering order was due not to Ikta's poor commanding, but to the fundamentally low experience of the soldiers in responding to his commands. The one who hadn't given Ikta the training necessary to raise that until the verge of the actual event, was none other than Suuya herself.

"…No, we can't. …Please excuse me…"

Sensing that there was no room for a dissenting opinion, she lost her resolve midway and began to help with the work of sorting the survivors. While continuing that, Suuya quietly asked a question of the superior officer beside her.

"…Everything until now, Warrant Officer, was it all according to your predictions?"

"? What's this all of a sudden? I told you everything beforehand, and you even helped with the bridge construction didn't you?"

Ikta shrugged his shoulders. Awkwardly averting her eyes, Suuya flashed back to the events of the morning.

"…Make it, underwater? A bridge?"

When she first heard the idea, Suua had absolutely no idea what her scene partner was saying. Her superior officer, who had borrowed all of the soldiers under his command and started lumberjacking, casually explained to her while creating blisters on his hand with an axe he wasn't accustomed to using.

"Well, not making- in this situation we're just submerging them. The width of this river is roughly 25 meters, and the isu trees in this area are on average about 10-20 meters in total length. We're submerging these on the river bed perpendicular to the river bed, you see. If we lay over five of them, we create a fine underwater path. For three platoons to use to attack, well, we'll probably need to lay across 30 of them."

"But, in essence this is a log, right? Don't trees float in water…?"

“A tree is a tree, but this is an isu tree, meaning that it’s a hard tree. A tree’s hardness is inversely proportional to its water content by percentage, but in an isu tree that is extremely low. Essentially, that means that its interior is fully packed together.”

“Right…”

“Well simply speaking, this tree will sink in water. The flow of that river is rather gentle, so if we secure it a bit there’s no need to worry about it being washed away. Above all, thanks to the water being muddy, our submerged bridge will be invisible to the enemy. We, luring them here, are the only ones who know that this river can’t be used a in defensive river formation.

“That which destroys the conception of a bridge as something that we build above water, Anarai Khan‘s idea of a ‘submerged bridge.’ …However, since it doesn’t have much of a use aside from military applications, the one who thought of it wasn’t too proud, though.”

Ikta murmured nostalgically. His faraway eyes at that time left a deep impression on Suuya.

“…Let’s say, if the enemy comes probing the depth of the water, what do you plan on doing then?”

“I think the probability of that is low. The Kuriri River is also a practice ground for the defensive river encampment, and Captain Sarihasrag, hailing from the center base, knows the depth of this river from direct experience. Once he sees that its been swollen with the rain, he’ll have predicted it to be deep and won’t suspect it to be shallow. He would need to realize that we have an ‘underwater bridge’ in order to suspect it, but do you think that short tempered mind of his is capable of that kind of flexibility?”

In the time it took for Suuya to find one flaw, Ikta prepared 10 times as many words. …Thinking that they were empty, rash remarks, anyone would be able to hold him in contempt. However, that that was not the case was proved in this recent battle. His words were words with power.

If one casually looked around, Suuya was definitely no longer the only one who couldn’t ignore this young warrant officer. One offensive victory so easily caused people’s evaluation of him to change completely.

“Well, if they come probing, we’ll fire and drive them away. Since if they enter the river, they’ll be in range of an air shooter. But, if anything Sadist Ikemen’s incompetence is worse than I imagined. As a result, we took more damage than I would’ve liked. Even if they are paint balls, shooting at your allies- is that normal?”

His tone itself seemed to be joking, but Ikta was truly angry about that matter. Hearing that, Suuya was increasingly bewildered. The man in front of her whom she had come to respect now appeared about to cry.

“Mm, so the sorting of the survivors and those killed in action is done. –Haro, my angel! Please give medical treatment to the injured!”

“You noticed us!? …W-well since the fighting appears to be over, please excuse us…”

Haro’s Medics Platoon, which had been hiding in a corner of the forest the whole time, came out when they were called by Ikta and circled around giving medical care to the injured persons born from the recent fighting. Deaths also occurred at times during mock battles, but fortunately this time, it seemed that they had gotten by with only large numbers of people with slight injuries such as bruises or sprains.

“That was a skillful play, Solork. Your opponents were flustered.”

Her Highness, Chamille, protected by her body guards, showed her face from behind Platoon Haro. It appeared that the two of them had united together sometime as she was searching for a place from which she could watch over the progress of the battle without interfering with the fighting.

“Thanks. But we’re in the middle of training, you know, if you not doing anything in particular, then please stay back, princess.”

Saying that, Ikta shook his hand as if shooing her away. Her Highness, the Princess’s lips bent in a “へ” shape and the members of bodyguards glared at the insolent youth with even darker murderous expressions, but the youth paid it no mind. The princess who ruined the cheery atmosphere returned with her bodyguards to Haro’s side, in her place, Torway came running from upstream accompanied by two subordinates from the Medics.

“I’m back, Ik-kun, Maa-kun. Would this situation mean that things went well?”

“Ik-kun forbidden- but I suppose it’s a nice result. Your report, please.”

“Right, understood. As planned, I did climb trees together with my subordinates at the river crossing point upstream, but… who came up there were Yatori-san’s soldiers, though? Since only three of them went ahead, we know that they were scouts meant to confirm the presence of our forces.”

“I see. Did you bring them down?”

“We shot them all, and they’re ‘killed in action’. After that, we sounded their signal gong, but… about that, though, it’s the worst pattern among the several we hypothesized.”

“Ahh, Yatori has always operated to the upper limits of our hypotheses, hasn’t she? Without directing all of the soldiers in her platoon to the river crossing point upstream, she leaves her main force in the middle so they can support their allies at any time, and sent light-footed reconnaissance soldiers to confirm whether my platoon was actually coming.”

With that, if the enemy were there, they could counter attack, and if the enemy weren’t, they could be confident that it was a trap and return to the main force. It was a reliable and careful way of attacking very like her. Ikta thought to prevent the reconnaissance soldiers from sending the sound signal so he had sent skilled gunner soldiers, Torway included, upstream, but… at this rate, it seemed that there being no sign from her subordinates in itself confirmed the presence of a trap for Yatori.

“Well, it’s fine. In any case, we’ve shaved off a substantial part of the enemy’s battle forces. Even by just comparing the number of remaining enemies and the number of allies ‘killed in action,’ you can tell that the recent battle was a great victory for us.”

“It’d be easier if they’d just surrender, though…. In actuality, the enemy has suffered enough damage that it wouldn’t be so far-fetched, no?”

Matthew said that in a slightly tired condition, and Ikta stuck out his tongue and shook his head horizontally.

“If their supreme commander weren’t Sadist Ikemen, then we could hope for a surrender. With his nature, he is not unlikely to make his army fight until the last man so he himself isn’t ‘killed in action.’”

As he let Torway and Matthew return to their respective platoons, Ikta faced all of the soldiers and made a declaration.

“-Therefore, everyone, I’m sorry but I have another job for you. First, shall we head to the northern entrance of the Woodlands? We’ll take the detour route from the east, so all the survivors don’t be late and follow~”

He gave a command in a trailing voice that was unexpected for many of the soldiers. Sergeant Major Suuya, the head of the file that began marching despite the confusion, confirmed Ikta’s intentions.

“…Warrant Officer, are we going in pursuit? Are you confident that the escaped enemy is in the north? Even so, why the detour and not the direct route?”

“Ahaha, you’re so serious, Suuya~ Be more easygoing when you go about it.”

Not panicking, not hurrying, at a constant pace, Ikta began his explanation to a baffled Suuya.

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“Hahh, hahh, Shit…! It shouldn’t- it shouldn’t have turned out like this!”

Captain Sariha, who had lost the confrontation interposing the Kuriri River, bringing along his remaining subordinates, escaped to a place that he could feel was somewhat safe. But both the soldiers and he himself resembled a dog, completely exhausted with its tail between its legs.

“Older brother, will you drink, water?”

First Lieutenant Sushuraf was also beside him, ever silent and expressionless, was supporting his brother. Taking the canteen from his younger brother, Sariha drained the contents in one gulp, but in the process, water had entered his trachea and he choked.

"Coughcough! ….Damn, what the hell is this! Why were those guys able to come at us running on water!? The water depth over there should definitely be to just under one's chest! Is Ikta Solork a fucking magician?!"

"Older brother, calm down. That was probably because they submerged something in the water. I daresay an object like a bridge."

"Bridge- A bridge!? A bridge is something we lay over water, and those fucking Illumination Division carpenters would take days or weeks to build it! The earliest they could have arrived here was yesterday night!"

Sariha, unable to accept the unpleasant reality, began yelling, and a while after his arrival, Yatorishino Igsem came over to him. Her platoon had also sustained quite some damage, but there was strength in her soldiers' eyes, and the remaining forces were gathering one after the other.

"I'm surprised. Does even a person such as you, Captain, know the concept of a universal escape route?"

The first thing out of Yatori's mouth was sarcasm, but she was quite seriously surprised.

A "universal route" was a military term, and it said, "take any path you want but gather at this location." In this situation, it implied a meeting place for when they had been defeated and scattered, but….

"Keh…! Why you, Yatorishino…!"

Sariha couldn't retort with anything. Whether he had thought about losing before the fighting, or whether he couldn't think that he was sure to win- whichever was true, this matter was already nothing more than an embarrassment for him.

"I-I'm not the only one at fault here! If you had come to support me earlier…!"

"Please excuse me for that. But if there is a unit that can move faster than mine, then show it to me."

Yatori spoke coldheartedly. Yatori had confidence regarding her tactics for this battle. She had done the best she could under the conditions set by her incompetent superior officer- if Ikta were here, he might be saying that right now.

In actuality, if not for her decision to leave the entirety of her platoon on friendly territory, Sariha's and Sushuraf's troops would probably have been destroyed in pursuit. Sariha was also aware of this, and he was miserable about it.

"By the way, what will you do? If we rebuild our troops and have another battle, you, the supreme commander, must give us directions. –And as you can see, my platoon is always ready to fight."

"…, y-you don't need to tell me that!"

Standing as if a flame were held to his behind, Sariha shouted at the weary survivors and had them reform their columns. After that, he fell deep in thought for 10 seconds, then brought to his mouth the first plan he could think of.

“We’re ambushing them. We’ll hide soldiers on both sides of the road stretching west of the open area in the north, and the moment they come by, we’ll attack from the left and right. First we attack from the outside, then we charge at them. If we do that, then we should be able to compensate for our disadvantage in numbers.”

That’s not a bad plan, Yatori thought. Only if the enemy pursues us, though.

“For that purpose, it’ll be necessary to have the light-footed soldiers go ahead and grasp the enemy’s current location, though…”

“In that case mobilize your soldiers, Yatorishino! They’re just bursting with energy, aren’t they!?”

Firmly suppressing a sigh, Yatori shook her head vertically. –Bursting with energy, was it?

It was amazing how he could say that, she thought. …They abruptly turned back from halfway up the path upstream to save their allies, and even undertook rear guard combat to prevent the enemy’s pursuit. There was no way that they were less exhausted than the group that only fled the scene.

While considering these things, before even 10 seconds passed after she received the command, Yatori chose three soldiers from her unit and deployed them as scouts. After seeing them leave, Sariha also immediately began his march.

“Let’s have some fun, Ikta Solork. I’ll give a good one to that smug face of yours…!”

-

“-I’d say Sadist Ikemen is getting fired up about his revenge around now. On the contrary, we weren’t pursuing them or anything in the first place~”

Saying that, Ikta tauntingly stuck his tongue out in the air. Suuya creased her eyebrows.

“I know that there is the risk of ambush during a pursuit, though…if we don’t attack for fear of that, how are we supposed to win this fight?”

“You’re pretty thickheaded, no, Suuya? But in that case, let me ask you something- if it were you, how would you deal with an enemy waiting to ambush somewhere along the route?”

“Well…normally, I would have the soldiers be completely on guard to their left, right, and rear. So that they will be able to respond immediately when they receive a surprise attack,...”

“That’s straightforward, but it a little unscientific. With your method, in contrast to the enemy which could come attacking us at any time, we have to continue being vigilant the entire time. Since the enemy can just gauge the timing to attack us after seeing our figures. We’d have a much harder time

than they would. It's not really worth it."

"…Then, would it be better to split from the path ourselves and go looking for the enemy in the forest…?"

"That is even more unscientific. There is a high probability that we won't find them if we search at random, and if we get lucky and do find them, then by that time our opponents will also have noticed our presence. If we walk and push through vegetation in large numbers, like it or not we're going to make noise."

"…So what are you saying that we do? I mean, nothing's gonna happen if we don't find the enemy-"

Interrupting her, Ikta thrust his index finger in front of Suuya's eyes.

"Listen well, Suuya- first please abandon your preconceived notion that 'we are pursuing the enemy.' There's no rule anywhere saying that we have to pursue and destroy an escaped enemy at all costs. If an unjustifiable pursuit will on the contrary welcome a disadvantage, then it's better to just think of different plan, see?"

"…a different plan…?"

"Incidentally, this is what I was thinking. --If we're the ones giving pursuit, then we'll be exhausted- that being said, we are reluctant to be the ones pursued. But if we are making them pursue us, then that's exciting. On that point, war and romance are completely the same."

-

Sariha was impatient. Already more than one hour had passed after he finished concealing soldiers on both sides of the road which he anticipated to be the surprise attack location. In spite of that, no matter how much time passes, the main enemy forces won't come in pursuit.

"…What the hell is up with this- did those guys have no intention to fight in the first place? …Hey, Yatorishino!"

"Yes. What is it, Captain?"

"Are the scouts still not back yet!? Can't they perform one reconnaissance job properly?!"

His hypocritical abuse going in one ear and out the other, Yatori explained uninterestedly.

"I directed the soldiers I sent as scouts to go, in order, south, then east, then north in search of the enemy. Therefore, if they are this late in returning here, that means that the enemy forces at the Kuriri River did not head directly north- in other words, that there is a high probability that they didn't take a straightforward route in their pursuit."

"What the hell? In other words my orders were wrong!?"

Yatori was fed up with this superior officer who became hysteric no matter what she said, but she suddenly heard a noise and turned around. The three soldiers she sent as scouts, were standing there out of breath.

“”We make our report, Warrant Officer Yatorishino. The three enemy platoons, seem to have taken a detour route east from the Kuriri River to go north. Currently, they have already deployed their main forces in a formation to block the northern entrance of the Southern Urt Woodlands.

Sariha, hearing that report from nearby, dropped his jaw in shock, not understanding what it meant.

“…They blocked, the northern entrance of the Woodlands? What for? What’s Ikta Solork planning?”

With a backward glance at her perplexed superior officer, Yatori , who had realized Ikta’s intentions, curved her lips.

“-They got us. Our escape route has been cut off, Captain.”

“Huh?”

“Have you forgotten where we came from to go to the Southern Urt Woodlands? It was the northern entrance. In addition, we will eventually have to pass through the northern entrance to return to the Center Base. That being said, if the return route is blocked when the mock battle ends, that would mean it was a lost battle because withdrawal was impossible.”

Sariha’s face instantly turned pale. He hadn’t considered that angle until just now.

“I-if you give it some time, then the mock battle will end, right? So what’s withdrawal being impossible or whatever-“

“Of course, they can’t actually prevent us from returning by passing through the northern entrance. However, this is a matter of interpretation, Captain. When we assume that this is a real battleground, you understand that there is no such official announcement of the ‘end of fighting’, correct? In that case, ’’what happens if the fighting continues on like this?’’ --I think that the victor of the mock battle should be decided on the basis of that realistic assumption-”

“…,, so if we can’t do anything with our escape route cut off, that equals their victory?”

“The justification of that verdict increases. Because in the current situation, we have already sustained greater damages.”

Sariha bit his nail and thought deeply. …In the first place, the first mock battle of the practice was usually a simple affair, with the first time the fighting started in the open area in the north also being the last, that ended in the destruction of one side. A judgment or a retreat- when he had been a warrant officer himself, it never turned into such a complicated matter.

“…So that guy, who dealt with this as a real battle, was better prepared than me, who took part in this thinking it was a game[46]? Better than me, a captain on active duty? -Argh, don’t fuck with me!”

A frenzied Sariha, by forcefully kicking each of their backs, returned the soldiers hidden in the brushwood to the road. When they, including Sushuraf's platoon which was encamped on the opposite side, reformed their files, he ordered a forward march in a furious voice.

"Head for the northern entrance! If that's what they want, then we'll go at them directly! We're not letting this gap in numbers stop us- I command a battalion of 600 soldiers as a captain in actual war, got it!? If this is just a plain and simple matchup between numbers, then it's obvious that we win when it comes to experience!"

Not lending an ear to Yatori's voice asking him to calm down, Sariha started the march at full speed.

-

"Oh- We're here, we're here. Alright, all troops, ''look like you're ready to shoot, okay''?"

Ikta, who deployed the soldiers in a formation to block the way of the northern entrance, when he could see the enemy in his field of vision, made them take a position to intercept them. Bow gun and air shooter muzzles were lined up next to each other at equal intervals.

"However, 'prepare yourself for a charge.'' After the signal, which is the moment they reform their files into ranks, we will fight and pierce through it. And so, ready your arms."

A confirmation followed. Giving detailed instructions to his subordinates, he himself had already joined the line of battle with a bow gun in hand.

"This isn't something we need to rush. Don't stick out, and consciously coordinate with your allies when you attack, alright? The best spearwork is the same as trash when compared to teamwork."

The enemy halted at a distance that came barely within range of an air shooter, and they finally began changing their battle formation from the columns used for marching to the rows meant for attacking. With the instant of the deciding battle within sight, the soldiers swallowed.

"Hey, hurry up and change to your ranks! If I need to say it again I'll kick you!"

On one hand, there was more or less a chance of victory for Sariha, who was making his allies, low in morale, take action through threats.

The enemy was deployed in a formation that blocked the northern entrance of the Southern Urt Woodlands. Conversely, no matter what happened, they couldn't go back any further. He was able to see a way to win at this 'cliff as per the rules.'

"''Push them back…!'' If they leave the designated battle area in the middle of the mock battle, that is a grand violation of orders. If even one of their soldiers passes the boundary line, they'll be disqualified for breaking the rules!"

He didn't consider it a disadvantageous match. Fortunately, the enemy forces were ready to meet them. When that side stopped their feet, this side would charge with all their remaining strength, so

they could probably cover the difference in numbers with force. The path was narrow, so the enemy couldn't escape to the sides.

"Listen up, even if you're 'killed in action,' don't just fall down. Pretend that you didn't notice you got shot and push the enemy as far in as you can."

With a sidelong glance at her superior officer who gave an order which was nothing if not a violation of the rules itself, Yatori secretly heaved a sigh. –She was tired of listening to this captain on active duty. Did he think he could command dead people on the battlefield?

With the soldiers' disappointment imperceptibly increasing, their columns were finally arranged in a charging formation. As if sending the order to attack from the rear side, Sariha inflated his chest completely with air, but-

"...ALRIGHT, ALL UNITS CHAR- ack!?"

His order was awkwardly cut off. If one looked, pink paint was splattered on the back of Captain Sariha's head. At the sudden, unpredicted turn of events, the soldiers next to him only widened their eyes and looked at their superior officer.

"…Huh…?"

The person himself, dumbfounded, put a hand to the back of his head. The moment he saw the sticky evidence that he had been "killed in action," he slowly began to comprehend the situation. –He had been shot. From where? Diagonally from the back. Then, by whom?

When his questions reached that point, the answer was derived almost intuitively. Sariha turned his body around and glared with a furious expression into the forest next to the road, and shrieked at the culprit hidden inside.

"…TORURU- YOU BASTAARDD!"

With that scream as the beginning, the enemy's attack against the supreme commander's former troops started. An air shooter volley fired at them diagonally from the back, coordinating with their allies, the soldiers in directly ahead of them also came charging in formation. The soldiers, deployed to attack and becoming attacked themselves, panicked and made a commotion, the majority being unable to adequately return fire.

"—They got us. Not bad, Torway…!"

In midst of that, Yatori still had the composure to assess the situation. –I see, at first glance, it appeared that all of the enemy's forces were deployed directly ahead, but they disguised the number using a concave line of battle. The ones who were left out of that were concealed at the sides of the path, and they opened fire the moment our main forces passed by.

A surprise attack from the sides by the troops in ambush. What Sariha had tried to pull off earlier was just pulled off in a similar fashion by the enemy. Yatori wasn't surprised. If it's Ikta, then she knew

he'd do at least that much.

What she ought to be praising right now, was the gunning unmatched in accuracy that took Sariha down in just one hit. First, it was undoubtedly Torway's handiwork. When she thought of the skill that brought down the commander who was supposed to be in a safety zone with one carefully aimed shot, she once again remembered the terror of the two soldiers of the name, "Remeon of the Bullet."

"…First Lieutenant Sushuraf, Captain was 'killed in action!' Take over as the supreme commander!"

While stopping the main force of the enemy charging at them from the front, Yatori yelled to her only remaining superior officer. Whether to retreat to provide resistance, she couldn't mobilize any platoon but her own with the authority she possessed. Now, as they were being partly sieged from the front and back, an immediate decision of their objective as a whole was essential.

"…Understood. We no longer have any prospect of winning this decisive battle. We'll break their siege and escape into the trees."

Saying that in a low voice, Sushuraf prepared the large-caliber air shooter he carried on his back with one hand, and fired it at the wall of enemy soldiers. The paint that spattered across a wide scope saw to four soldiers being "killed in action" in one shot.

"I created an opening. Wrench open that hole, Yatorishino."

"—Roger that."

Faced with adversity, a twisted smile rose to Yatori's lips. It was simple and precise, but the execution was extremely difficult. This kind of order was exactly what she wanted.

Keeping control even now in this dire situation, Yatori's platoon began moving and tore into the small seam in the siege. Repelling the enemies blocking their way, pushing their way through waves of people with abandon- in the end, though there were more injuries to their allies, she executed her order at last.

"Continue."

From the prepared escape route, the platoon which Sushuraf was leading began withdrawing without a moment's delay. However, the platoon which Sariha personally commanded, unable to recover from the initial confusion, was already destroyed. Less than one-third of the remaining two platoons was still surviving. To anyone's eyes, this was a decisive rout.

As the defeated soldiers fled into the trees, Yatori suddenly creased her eyebrows as she escaped from the free-for-all fight,

"…First Lieutenant Sushuraf. The rule is that those 'killed in action' would remain where they are."

The source of her confusion was being carried on Sushuraf's shoulder. As if it were natural, the younger brother was carrying the older brother, who in a state of peace surpassing anger that had no

relation to the fact that he'd lost all power as per the rules.

"If this were an actual battle, I would never desert my older brother. Even if he were a corpse."

"--. I see."

After hearing Sushuraf's short words, Yatori didn't pursue it further. She didn't feel like criticizing him for the breach of the rules. Just, if she were in the same position, what would she have done? - She thought a little about that inevitability.

"Mmm- aww, they didn't let us destroy them…"

Watching the enemy disappear into the trees, Ikta lightly scratched the back of his head.

"Knowing Yatori, I did think that she might break through, you see. First Lieutenant Sushuraf's shot which created the opening- now that was a bit unfair, no? Well, we have Torway on our side, so let's call it even, shall we?"

Next to him, Sergeant Major Suuya nodded vaguely. Next to them, the soldiers, overjoyed at their victory, were in an uproar, and sending enthusiastic glances at their leader. But, that person ignored them and clapped his hands together.

"Alrigh~t, everyone settle settle. We let the enemy escape, but the mock battle ended with this. There's no time left, so we won't pursue them. –So Haro! Please give medical attention to the injured!"

"Wahh! W-we were found again!?"

Haro's Medics platoon, timidly coming out of the trees, began looking after the injured persons that were mass produced in the recent battle. While watching that out of the corner of his eye, Ikta briefly surveyed the soldiers in front of him.

"With this, there's no need to worry about the future. –Therefore, now is the time to scold my beloved subordinates. This is addressed to the team with no relation to whether you're alive or dead. Well then, prepare yourselves!"

Saying that and putting his hands together, Ikta cracked his knuckles loudly. The soldiers were caught by surprise. They never would have guessed that he was the type of superior officer who engaged in corporal punishment.

"Private First Class Guemp! Private First Class Aigi! Private Vio! Corporal Dobai! Come before me!"

The four soldiers called by name nervously walked up to their superior officer. Ikta silently glared at them one by one before opening his mouth.

"The-four-of-you, even though I made such a point of it, stuck out too much when we charged. What's

the big idea? Do you want to be surrounded by the enemy? Are you masochists who love being sieged and destroyed by the enemy? Are you at the rebellious age? Basically, are you idiots? Do you want to die?"

The soldiers were dumbfounded. Usually, when one was reproved by one's superior, there was nothing but yelling involved, and this nagging way of being scolded was rare. In addition, since there was this strange humor to be heard in it, they somehow ended up just listening to it.

"Keep doing that and you'll die. If you jump out like that you'll have to face three or four opponents at once with just one of you. I know of one person who call pull that kind of stunt off, but if you try copying that[47] you're definitely going to die.

Do you understand? I'll say it now since I have the chance. I don't need any brave people in Ikta-kun's unit. I'd much rather have lazy people. Instead of secluding yourself in the mountains and undergoing ascetic training so you can win one-vs-three, constantly think of ways you can fight three-vs-one in your bed. That's what you call a scientific way of thinking."

At this point, the person himself already forgotten what the point of the scolding was. What he said after was close to instinct.

"But I can't have you misunderstanding. Being lazy in the right way, is actually extremely difficult. When you're lazy in the wrong way, you'll accordingly end up having to work more than necessary. On the other hand, when you work the wrong way, you'll accordingly end up not being able to relax.

Well then. When you think these things through, both being lazy in the right way and working in the right way, don't you think that those two things end up being the same? It's kind of contradictory, no? Well, this, you see- actually it's not contradictory in the least, you see. ''Welcome to the world of science!''"

Science? What's that? – Commotion stirred among the soldiers. The only similar word which they knew of was "theology."[48] The word that had yet to be recorded in that world's dictionary was "science."

With a speaking style similar to that of a founder of a new religion, or rather ''with that very style itself'', Ikta continued.

"Logical and utilitarian, and as a result a fantastic way of thinking that lets you be extremely lazy. That is the essence of science.

You should think it over- how did humans advance this far? -Humans planted fields. Because it was a pain to go out hunting every day for unstable game. –Humans dug wells. Because it was a pain to go one by one to draw water from the river. –Humans coined money. Because it was a pain to carry around heavy goods to exchange them.

Conclusion. The evolution of humanity, all of it was led by the impulse of, 'I want to relax.' …If that is the case, what about war? Of course, war is also the same. That is to say, the 'relaxed war' is

therefore the ‘correct war!’”

Caught in a saturation attack, no one noticed that the logic in between skipped about five steps. And more frightening- Ikta himself had no definite self-awareness of his ability to incite others with rhetoric among his god-given weapons.

“So come with me! Whenever troops of Ikta Solork fight, we will be relaxed, and we will be victorious! Invincibility is standard, and laziness first-class! To those who follow me, I’ll bring relaxation unto each and every one you!”

The moment he finished speaking, Ikta realized, “Ahh- whoops, I overdid it.” But, it was already too late.

At first, all anyone did was stare dumbly in amazement, and the voice that disturbed the silence was truly a tiny one. However, that commotion slowly but surely was repeated and amplified among the soldiers. As a ripple arising from one point on water spreads across the entire surface while forcefully growing in height. The response of the soldiers who had received Ikta’s grand address soon reached a final climax with cheering mixed with applause--.

“”””””””YEEAAHHH! IKTA SOLORK! IKTA SOLORK!”””””””””

At his own name being chanted by countless overlapping voices, Ikta was overcome with surprise. Even though he had only thought to use this opportunity to earn the soldiers’ trust, he had far surpassed that goal before he realized it.

“Hey, what is this? …The triumphant return of some great hero…?”

Filled neither with joy nor with a sense of accomplishment, genuine chills ran down Ikta’s spine. There are two types of geniuses- someone thought that once. Thus, this might have been the first incident proving that- in that sense- Ikta Solork was not the same type as Anarai Khan.

“Wow- Ik-kun, you’ve become really popular when I wasn’t looking!”

Torway, who had been commanding the detached soldiers in ambush, had returned. However, Matthew twitched his cheeks and corrected his statement.

“No, he became really popular ‘’as you were looking’’…. What the hell was that speech before? The humor was simple, but there was a weird passion running through it. I mean, don’t go winning over the soldiers in our units too.”

“…Matthew, Ikemen…. No, sorry. I cast too wide a net with my preaching.”

Slapping his cheeks with both hands and bracing himself, Ikta returned his gaze to the problem at hand.

“A~lright- Everyone settle~. For the time being let’s just maintain our line of battle until time is called~.”

When Ikta requested silence with with his prolonged expressions, even the rowdy soldiers slowly quieted down. When adequate order returned to area's atmosphere, Torway opened his mouth.

"…That reminds me. When we were hiding in the trees earlier, we saw Her Highness, Chamille."

"Ahh- the princess? I thought that she wasn't close by- so she was with the other side?"

"Yea, together with her bodyguards, she was walking west looking around restlessly for something… maybe she got bored of spectating and left?"

"—No, that would be strange."

"Wha?"

"That princess has a strong sense of responsibility unbefitting her age. She wouldn't do anything like leave the location when the deciding battle has yet to happen. If she were picking flowers, she'd probably swallow her pride and make do with somewhere close by. At the very least, it's suspicious that she isn't here right now."

"That's pretty exaggerated- it's probably just a whim. Didn't she just go to see Yatori?"

"The direction is fundamentally wrong. If that were the case, she'd be going south, not west, Matthew."

"Then… maybe, she was looking for me?"

"I won't say the chances are nonexistent, but they're slim. Even if she notices the absence of Platoon Torway, then the princess would've realized that meant that you were lying in ambush for a surprise attack. Would she drag her bodyguards along when she goes looking there? She may be a princess, but she can read a situation."

An uncomfortable feeling grew inside Ikta. Leaving the other two behind, he settled the question.

"…There is no reason. Yes, that is the biggest problem. At a point before the start of battle, there is no reason whatsoever for the princess to be heading west. If her objective in coming to watch the practice was simply to spectate, or to keep the Remeon brothers in check, for her to achieve that, she had to 'be here.' Nevertheless, she was 'heading west'…"

Both of Ikta's eyes opened wide. The next moment, he gave an unbelievable order.

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"…Nnn…."

With a cloudy consciousness, the princess felt like she was being carried on the back of a large turtle. The back she suddenly felt was nothing but hard, and massive. Though as the result of the drugs she inhaled, she didn't retain the reasoning power to determine that it was light armor.

“I apologize for my impertinence, Your Highness, the Princess. Please wait a bit for now…”

The male bodyguard who was carrying her on his back, though not 10 minutes had passed since he swapped roles, didn’t know how many times he had already repeated the same apology.

“…Hey, sorry, I can’t do it anymore. Can you switch with me…?”

“…Ahh”

That this girl’s body, which was supposed to be as light as a feather, weighed as heavily as gold on those who carried her was not just the fault of their exhaustion from continuously walking inside the forest for a long time- not at all.

For humans born and raised in the Empire, the royal family was almost synonymous with the gods. As long as one wasn’t an extremist traitor, one couldn’t forget the respect due to those beings. …Even the ones committing these reckless actions were no exception to this spirituality as subjects of the Empire.

“…Please forgive me, Your Highness, the Princess. Please forgive me…”

When several minutes passed since he received the small body, an apology as such invariably came slipping out from the mouth of the human carrying her. Those continued to enter Her Highness’s ear, who was half asleep, and it recalled even to her dim consciousness the earlier events--.

“Where is he!? Where has Solork collapsed?!”

Not caring that her beautiful golden hair had become covered in tree leaves, Her Highness, the Princess, ran in search of the youth’s form. The impetus came about 10 minutes before, beginning with the report one bodyguard brought back. He told her, “the Medics soldier I met there was saying that Ikta Solork was bleeding and collapsed in the west.’”

From the moment she heard that, she lost her normal judgment. The belief that “Solork is at the northern entrance planning to summon and destroy the enemy forces” also vanished. Although she couldn’t confirm his figure from her location, and she had trust in her bodyguards, the major truth of it was that the human being Ikta Solork was the singular deciding factor for her. Recently when it came to matters involving him, reason was becoming slightly ineffective on Chamille. And before she knew it, she was being lured west to a place far removed from the main battle location, the northern entrance of Woodlands. However, her bodyguards also accompanied her for a while pretending to search for Ikta. Because they didn’t have confirmation that there was no other humans around.

No, on the contrary, there were a few people who were truly searching. It wasn’t that all of the 20 bodyguards were betraying her. However, the fact that they were only a fraction compared to villains was unavoidable, and what awaited them was a quite sudden tragedy.

“Wha…!? J-just what are you-“ “Y-your Highness, please esca…!“

An air shooter bullet released from behind pierced through the innocent body guards one after the other. …Even so, the ones who avoided instant death desperately tried to protect the princess. There were also those who, covered in blood, took the princess and continued to flee for several minutes.

However, their devotion made no difference. With the sound of compressed air being released, blood spilled from a fifth head, and the villains' hands finally reached Her Highness, the Princess, with whom he had been escaping.

"Please forgive me, Your Highness, the Princess. We will be having you come with us."

Beginning things with an apology, one of the villains declared their treachery. That man was a veteran soldier serving as the leader of the bodyguards, his name Ison Hou, who worked his way up the ranks to captain. He had strong faith in superior officers, enough to be entrusted with the protection of the princess, and he was given the stamp of approval by the upper echelon of the army in the screening process.

"…The story that Solork collapsed, was that a lie to lure me away?"

When that came out of the cornered princess's mouth, she herself was surprised, but it was also a confirmation. Even at that time, still in a corner of her mind, the vision of Ikta lying prone and covered in blood remained.

"Yes. …Since it seemed Your Highness had taken an interest in him, we used it as a pretext."

There was no sarcasm in Captain Ison's phrasing, but Her Highness, the Princess's cheeks suddenly burned red.

"It seems I confused the order of my questions. –Why are you doing this?"

"…"

"Answer me! Do you have a rendezvous to uphold?!"

"Please forgive me. We know that Your Highness, the Princess, is innocent."

Stubbornly not answering with a reason, Captain Ison only piled on more apologies. With that as a cue, other bodyguards came from behind him and surrounded her.

"S-stop! …Mmph!? MMPHH!"

Still, the princess, with a drug-laced handkerchief put over her mouth and nose, didn't faint within a few seconds. She flailed her arms and legs for over three minutes and when he confirmed that she finally quieted down, Captain Ison gave and order to his subordinate.

"Carry her on your back. Sincerely try not to treat her too roughly."

With that low, composed voice as the last thing she knew, Her Highness, the Princess's

consciousness became vague, and she saw only dreams of being carried by an enormous turtle from that point forward.

However, in her dream, she felt that the turtle was shedding tears. It was just like a turtle at the time of spawning…

-

Using the meeting location for times when they were routed for the second time in the span of one day, Captain Sariha had gone beyond both panic and anger, and was rather in a trance-like state.

"Older brother, I'm pouring it on your head."

"…"

Concerned for his older brother who had paint sticking all over his head, Sushuraf poured water from a canteen and washed it off. Sariha himself said nothing as it was being done. Yatori found it quite ironic that the man who only made mistakes as the supreme commander, was exhibiting exemplary behavior as someone "killed in action."

"-First Lieutenant Sushuraf, the time limit for the mock battle will pass soon. Won't you send the signal of surrender?"

While measuring the inclination of her eyes, Yatori made the obvious suggestion. But, the moment the three-syllable word "surrender" came from her mouth, Captain Sariha yelled out forgetting his single good decision as a dead body.

"Here, surrender!? Don't fuck around, who's surrendering…!"

"…Captain. There's no need to say it, but the current supreme commander is First Lieutenant Sushuraf."

"The hell I'm listening to what a shitty warrant officer has to say! I'm not giving in- until I beat the shit out of Toruru and Ikta Solork, I'll never surrender…!"

At the sight of her superior officer yelling and his spit flying, Yatori persuaded him in a soft tone.

"Captain, please listen. In any case, the mock battle will be over soon. If we don't send the signal of surrender now, it will only injure your honor, Captain, to be known as 'the commander who doesn't even know when he's lost.' At the very least, receiving that dishonor in a practice against new recruits wasn't your true intention as a Captain was it?"

"…"

"Now, you can still end the mock battle saying, 'I was completely cornered, but the last retreat was a success.' By acknowledging your loss, you can show your generosity. Do you understand? "

Sariha’s voice lost its strength, and a shadow came over his downcast face. Yatori wrapped up her argument with a single phrase.

“Please give us your wise decision as supreme commander.”

Even addressed as such, while hiding his face, Sariha’s shoulders trembled slightly and he said nothing.

….However, if you looked closely, water fell in drops onto the collar of his army uniform from his downcast face.

Yatori gave a sigh and turned her body, and sat herself down on a fallen tree nearby. I wonder what Ikta would do if he were here- suddenly, she thought about that. Would he hit his dejected conversation partnerwhere it hurt?

“You can’t do anything, can you? That guy, he’s strict on men with pretty faces, so-“

The moment she muttered that and smiled, a metallic sound reached them coming from nowhere.

Those who understood the meaning of that sound, Yatori being the first, showed their surprise one by one and stood up.

“…A signal of surrender? Why are they-no, not just that…”

Quieting the clamoring soldiers with a sharp look, Yatori focused on her hearing. It was as if several signals with different meanings were being repeated. Not just a normal sound signal, this was certainly….

“…I see. I don’t quite understand, but I’ve got it.”

Rather than thinking about it too deeply, they should act. Making that judgment according to her natural intuition and dynamism, she made the soldiers in her platoon who were confused by the sudden situation line up in front of her.

“Excluding the 28 people we lost track of, total 12 people…it’s a little flaky, but there’s nothing I can do.”

“Where are you going, Yatorishino?”

Before she requested for permission to depart, not Sariha but Sushuraf came asking instead. Though she was slightly surprised at first, Yatori, judging that he had taken supreme command given Sariha’s condition, informed him.

“Yatorishino Igsem with under 20 soldiers is now heading west.”

“The signal just now?”

“Yes. I wasn’t able to understand it completely, but in any case I fear that there is an emergency situation,”

“Understood. Take what’s left of my platoon with you. Though the majority of them are exhausted. Hey-”

When Sushuraf began talking in a low voice, the air shooter soldiers who had been sitting in protest stood up, and joined the end of Yatori’s files. At the extremely unexpected assistance, she widened her eyes and looked at the gigantic first lieutenant.

“If they get worn out during the journey, leave them.”

“Naturally, I’ll accept this privilege, but… Why are you letting me do this?”

“You saved my older brother in the first battle. I’m grateful for that.”

His words were few, but in them was a simple reason that satisfied Yatori. She stretched her spine and bowed to the first lieutenant, and giving a final glance at Sariha, starting running as soldiers’ vanguard.

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“…What’s that sound, ever since earlier?”

The 15 former bodyguards advancing through the forest, had long been puzzled about the metallic sound of unknown meaning that came ringing from afar. They thought that it had some meaning, but they could distinguish it no matter how hard they concentrated.

“Ignore it. Even if they noticed Her Highness, the Princess’s disappearance, the training units have just finished their mock battle and lack a system of command. I can’t imagine how that they could carry out an effective pursuit of us.“

Now taking in one hand the princess who had circulated between his subordinates, Captain Ison stated his objective views. His voice was always low, heavy, and unwavering. The commander was constantly like this because he learned it from a revered superior officer very long ago.

“Just a little more, then we’ll come out on the main road. The arranged cavalry is waiting for us there. Then we have achieved our mission.”

“…That’s right. Just a little, just a little more...”

Ison knew that his subordinates’ hearts were wavering. They were likely thinking not that their mission would be over in just a little while, but that everything would be over. He didn’t think that was impossible.

“If it’s painful to look at the princess, then don’t look anymore. You all should have been prepared at the start.”

The captain’s strict words settled his subordinates whose hearts were wavering between loyalty and justice. That will tide them over, Ison judged. It was a prediction grounded on long years of experience. However, that was-.

“-Fire!” “…!?”

At approximately the same time as his short command, air shooter bullets and bow gun arrows came flying at them from all angles. Blood and scraps of fabric fluttered down, and two of the more unlucky people lost their footing and fell forward.

But, with the divine protection of their light armor, the remaining 13 soldiers got away either unscathed or with slight injuries. While sensing that that the enemy forces were small in scale, Ison took up a bow gun arrow that had lodged at his feet and gazed at it intently.

“...I can imagine it. In the place of arrowheads, they sharpened the tip of the wooden arrows, did they?”

Ison saw through various things in a few seconds. The enemy troops had fewer numbers than a platoon, and the larger part of their composition was accounted for by divisions other than the air shooters. It was obvious from the circumstances that they were training troops with no weapons meant for actual battle, their scheme to compensate for that was the bow gun arrow with a sharpened tip. It also seemed that the air shooter soldiers were firing paint bullets having made the gas pressure of the pressurized air the same as that when using real bullets, but the penetrative power of the bullets themselves was low and insufficient in strength.

As if the Captain’s composure had been contagious, and the other bodyguards weren’t agitated even as they received the assault. Surrounding the captain and the princess in a circle, they pointed the muzzles of each of the air shooters they prepared uniformly in all directions.

“You number fewer than a platoon, and I can gather that you are not air shooter soldiers. It is also highly unlikely that you are the Medics soldiers. If you were Illumination soldiers, you would use the darkness of the woods to your advantage and resort to blinding us with High Beams. Therefore, you are a Ballistics platoon which has lost its strength. –Correct, Warrant Officer Yatorishino Igsem?”

His somewhat cold observing eye made the soldiers hiding in the darkness of the trees shiver. Unimpressed with that reaction, Ison continued further.

“Well then, carry out a second volley. Even if one or two people die-“

“This time, you’ll know our positions- correct?”

That voice reached Ison’s ears along with the sound of shoe soles and dirt chafing together. At the exact same time, the blade of a saber was held to the nape of his neck.

“But, there is also this method of learning my position. The soldier uniform suits you, but aren’t you wearing your cap too low?”

“…So you were lying in wait up a tree? To unhesitatingly fly into the middle of the enemy, you’re quite the hero, Warrant Officer Igsem.”

Ison wasn’t perturbed even in these circumstances, but as expected the same couldn’t be said for his subordinates. Startled at the girl who suddenly appeared in the middle of the circle, they panicked and moved to turn the gun muzzles around, but Yatori didn’t allow it.

“Don’t move. If even a single gun is turned toward me, your leader’s head falls.”

“Then, let my head fall as you please. I order to all troops. Turn around immediately and fire at the girl.”

Captain Ison showed absolutely no hesitation. But, again it seemed that there were no subordinates around him who could enact his order with the same resolve. It was as if a death god had completely reaped the proximity.

“…You narrowly escaped death. It seems that for as much as you think that way, they don’t think it’s right to let you die. It’s complicated, but I think that you probably ought to be happy, Captain Ison Hou.”

Captain Ison scoffed at his calculation error. Thinking a little, he settled on a simple resolution.

“We’re deadlocked. But in your case, this is a desperate play for time, isn’t it?”

“I’m not the only one being unfair. It’s the same in your case, too.”

“I’ve also wagered everything I’ve got, but you're giving a better show than I am.”

They continued their farcical exchange in this tense atmosphere as if they were crossing swords. However, one change took place at that point. The princess who had been dozing off on Ison’s back opened her eyes at Yatori’s voice, which she had been accustomed to hearing.

“…Is that, Yatori? …Where…?”

“Greetings, Your Highness, the Princess. Is there anything strange about your body?”

Rubbing her sleepy eyes, and looking around, the princess gradually remembered the circumstances she had been left in, and when she realized the current encircled fighting ground situation, she then looked at Yatori with a face seeming on the verge of tears.

“It’s alright, Your Highness, please be calm. It’s the same as when you fell from the ship. He will save you soon.”

“..B-but…Solork is…?”

Her secret hope chipped away at the remainder of her anxiety. Yatori smiled gently.

“Ikta will come soon. Excuse me, I was impatient. If only you had woken up a little later, he might have coordinated perfectly with Your Highness’s awakening.”

Seeing Yatori’s smile, the princess quickly regretted her childishness. Entirely surrounded by gun-wielding enemies, under circumstances in which a millimeter of negligence was intolerable, of all things she was still concerned about someone else. How much courage that took, how much of a burden that forced the fiery-haired girl to bear, Her Highness, the Princess, couldn’t even imagine it.

“…Hm. If Your Highness, the Princess, has awakened, then it’s finally a good time to talk about our motives, no?”

Ison was the one who proposed it. Not knowing his intention, Yatori made a severe expression.

“…Motive? You mean the reason you tried to kidnap royalty even as soldiers who pledged their loyalty to the Emperor?”

“Yes. The reason we completely abandoned our pride as soldiers, and took on this crime.”

There was no inflection of any sort in his tone. Even when it came time to speak his current beliefs, that remained the same.

“Then, I will tell you. We… the 15 of us including the two collapsed there, all of us were Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan’s disciples.”

The one who reacted most strongly to the mention of that name was the princess who stood behind the speaker.

“…What…did you say, just now…?”

“Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan, who suffered a death in battle at the end of hard fighting at the Eastern Stronghold about three months earlier, was our former teacher, is what I said, Your Highness, the Princess. Each of us had served many superior officers in our military careers, but there was no greater commander than he. That is something which we will always be able to declare.”

“…Don’t tell me, your motive is…”

The princess’s voice shook. Captain Ison’s left eye stared across his back at her face.

“That is right, Third Princess. One of our former teacher’s hundred million regrets, as he was made to be a human sacrifice to compensate for the mistakes of the internal government, WAS NOT BEING ABLE TO FULFILL ONE OF YOUR INSIGNIFICANT ORDERS!”

Ison shouted. He betrayed his inhuman impression in an instant, and blustered with completely unpredictable timing. The princess who felt that fierce intensity through her entire body, entered a state of panicked fear and began to struggle on Ison’s back. But, concerning the state of affairs, the fatal change was not this, but-

“”You finally revealed a hole in your defense, Warrant Officer Yatorishino.’’”

“…!?”

She withstood the sudden outburst. But she had been caught up by the condition of Her Highness, the Princess, who had fallen into a panic, and this time Yatori had let her concentration, which she couldn’t lose under any circumstances, slip for only a moment…!

He buried the tip of the blade into his palm. Amazingly, Ison had willingly plunged his right hand into the blade and prevented the saber’s movement. Furthermore, before the remaining main gauche swooped in, he held down Yatori’s left arm with his remaining hand. Thus throwing his opponent’s body off-balance, he flipped his enemy onto the ground with skillful martial arts…!

As if to signal its wielder’s defeat, the main gauche which left Yatori’s hand sounded as it fell to the ground.

On top of drawing out even an instant of vulnerability, he had a heart of steel that didn’t hesitate to act when the chance arose. In the end, that was likely the reason for the failure of the “Igsem of the Blade” who prided herself in being the strongest in close quarters combat.

“See by nature I don’t like to raise my voice, but…. Even still, I do try shouting once in a while.”

“…, keh…!”

“There’s no need to point your guns, you people. I can strangle her with one hand like this, so keep watch of our surroundings. Also, to her fire spirit partner, move and I kill your master.”

Shia, who had slipped out of his hip pouch, faced Ison, and prepared to release flames from his ‘fire chambers,’ stopped in his tracks. Plainly stated, this was the perfect control of the soldier who was even thoroughly aware of the spirit’s thought patterns.

“-Your Highness, the Princess, as well, don’t consider jumping off my back since I have removed my hands. Though it was disrespectful, I fastened the string of your kimono while you were sleeping. Even if you tried to escape, it would be a wasted effort.”

“S-stop! You, let Yatori…!”

Not curling up in fear and trying to rescue Yatori who was in a predicament by grabbing at the enemy, the princess’s courage was something to be commended. She moved her hands to the captain’s face from his back, and desperately dug into his skin with her nails. ..However, this attack was powerless against the man who had willingly pierced his hand with the saber, and he didn’t move a single eyebrow.

“…Gah…ngh...High,ness…”

The carotid artery in her neck pressed under his finger, Yatori’s consciousness gradually became faint from oxygen deprivation. But, as if to say he wouldn’t wait for such a leisurely death, the



strength in the captain’s left hand increased. Ison’s right hand, having flung the saber to the ground by force, stopped the body of the princess, who couldn’t simply watch and jumped off his back, without even relying on the kimono string.



One could even hear the creaking and groaning of her neck bones. Surely, this was the instant when she was on the verge of death- completely out of nowhere, Captain Ison's forehead started spurting blood.

"…Nn…?"

Losing feeling in his arms and legs, Captain Ison's body began to shake violently. Strength slipped out of his left hand, which would have broken his enemy's cervical vertebrae with another push. –That instant, Yatori, who had been held down, opened both eyes, and sprung up with all her energy. She almost instinctively took up her saber and main gauche which were lying on the ground, and then-!

"AAAHHHHHH-!"

A bloody wind overtook them. Yatori, resurrected from the brink of death, regarded everyone within reach of her blades except the princess as an enemy, and, becoming a gale of blades, mowed them down.

In two seconds four people lost their heads, and in five seconds half of all of the body guards descended into a sea of blood. Her platoon would later tell the story as witnesses- that at this time, the swords which Yatorishino Igsem wielded exceeded the limits of a human being.

One beat behind her revival, the soldiers hidden in the shadows of the surrounding trees also began their charge. There was already no means of fighting against the former bodyguards who'd been ripped apart by Yatori from the inner side. Piercing eyes or gaps in their armor with bow gun arrows- when they faltered it had been carried out one by one by Yatori's two blades.

Not two minutes after the start of their charge, they were annihilated. …After that, only the fiery-haired girl standing dazed in the sea of blood, and her Highness, the Princess, whose body she completely bathed in the blood she brought forth, surrounded by the horrified soldiers standing around them, were left remaining in the center of the battlefield.

"A-are you unharmed, Yatori-sa…!?"

"Hey, just what the hell happened—WOAH!?"

Rushing in one after the other came Torway, who rescued Yatori from her predicament earlier with a single magnificent shot from afar, and Matthew. But even they lost their words at the sight of their ally dyed completely red with blood.

"…High,ness…. …Are, you, safe?.... Thank…goodness…"

The demonic swordsman's stiff lips spoke human words with great difficulty. With that, Yatori finally noticed that there were no longer any enemies she needed to kill surrounding her. She tried to store her two swords in their sheathes, but even they had been torn off her hip in the course of battle. She tried to at least free her hands, but, as if they had fused with the hilts, her fingers didn't move.

"What's this…The swords, won't…"

“Ya…Yato,ri…”

Even the rescued princess was frightened of that figure. She was frightened, but she thought that there was likely nothing else so beautiful, so fleeting, or so noble. She was the pair of blades. To protect her master- she was her blades of pure steel wielded with that being her dearest wish as one titled an Imperial Knight.

“—Woah, being flashy again, are we? I won’t be able to eat tomatoes for a while, seeing this.”

However, there was the youth who nonchalantly stepping into that red domain with a complaint. His short breath and sweaty skin told that he had come running here at full strength.

“…Ik,ta…?”

When the fiery-haired girl turned her blank gaze, Ikta casually raised a hand.

“Yo, Yatori, there’s something important I need to tell you. You might already know it, though… Right now, you’re really red, you know?”

What am I going to do if this fails?- entirely not worrying about that before he spoke was one of Ikta’s amazing points. And strangely, the jokes he told in extreme situations were able to calm people’s hearts.

“…Haha… Th-the red, is fine, but… I can’t stand, reeking of metal from head to toe…”

“Reek of metal? No~, that has nothing to do with being red. That’s because you’re holding those hunks of metal in both your hands.”

Saying that as if were obvious, Ikta came in front of Yatori and gently massaged not her fingers clutching the hilts but the muscles of her forearm. After he continued that for a minute, strength left her stiffened hands and the swords that had practically integrated with them separated from her palms and fell.

“There, I got it. That’s enough for today.”

“…Thank, you…. …But, what- right….I might be, a little tired…”

Saying that with a wry smile, she fell forward, leaning her body on Ikta, and lost consciousness.

Not caring that she was covered in blood as he held and supported her, the youth murmured as if he were disgusted.

“You always work too hard, you know. I tell you to be more relaxed about things, but you really don’t listen, do you?”

Entrusting her to the soldiers, Ikta turned a second time to the center of sea of blood. The princess, hugging her knees, hoped he would talk to her, but his goal was elsewhere.

“…You’re alive, aren’t you? You there, can you still talk?”

Ikta’s words were directed at Captain Ison, who laid collapsed on his face. To tell the truth, Her Highness, the Princess, was hurt by the order of his priorities, but at any rate his concern was for the dying soldier.

“…I can’t see anymore, but yes, somehow…. Your voice, you’re Warrant Officer Solork, right…?”

“And you are the leader of the body guards, Captain Ison. May I have an explanation of this situation?”

Finding it unbearable that Ikta asked for that reason out of Captain Ison’s mouth, the princess forcibly interposed her own words.

“It seems that they were Lieutenant Hazaaf Rikan’s disciples….all of the 15 people here…”

In the end, it was painful for her to say any more than this. Hearing that, Ikta’s face distorted in rage, furthering the princess’s regret.

“…If that’s all there is, then I understand very well. I have no will to ask or criticize you for any more. I believe that I also understand you feelings. If you had been so inclined, I would’ve liked if you’d invited me as one of your allies.”

“Just- Ikta, what-!?”

Matthew, who had yelled without thinking, might have done better to praise his good sense. Ikta had just now committed two reckless actions. The reckless action of saying that in the presence of royalty, and the reckless action of saying that in the presence of Chamille.

“Even though I say that, I have regrettably delayed your plan. That a man like you would commit such extreme actions, means that you definitely have a detailed, magnificent plan together with several of your allies. Your final objective is either to threaten or to overthrow the cabinet. It’s really disappointing. I don’t know how far you could have gone, but even still if you would have pulled it off, it’d be something that I’d have wanted to see.”

Ikta continued to talk feverishly, and Ison made a puzzled face.

“…Can I, ask one thing, Warrant Officer Solork…?”

“Ask me two or three, however many you’d like. There are no strings attached to the compassion I offer you.”

“…Why were we, caught by you here…?”

Ikta bit his lip. That was a very humble question for one on the brink of death. Why wasn’t it more selfish? This man had the authority to tear down the gods.

"…If that is your wish, then I will speak. First, you tried to kidnap the princess from the vicinity of the northern entrance of the Woodlands. Torway just happened to witness that, but… the timing of the execution wasn't bad. Since, as you had predicted, our awareness was concentrated on the mock battle.

"If you are fleeing with someone from around the northern entrance, then it's fastest to come out onto a main road from the west of the Woodlands. The northern entrance is out of the question because Ikta's group is hiding out there, it is difficult to cut across to the southern entrance, and going to the east, on top of it being a detour, also has the danger of running into someone.

"…Therefore, your escape is from the west. That comes with one condition, though- if you recall the topographic map of that area, then your route is restricted even further. The northwest side of the Southern Urt Woodlands faces the Tahbai Mountain Range. Of course a mountain path crosses through them, but there is no way that people who want to get out on a main road as quickly as possible would do anything like climb a mountain. They would follow the base of the mountain as closely as possible, and go from the first road they come upon to the main one, right? That is right here."

"…I can, acknowledge that. However, how did Warrant Officer Yatorishino cut us off…?"

That was the part Ison wanted to hear more than anything else. Because, they had aimed for the height of the mock battle when they executed the kidnapping to avoid being pursued after their crime.

"When we realized the possibility that the princess was kidnapped, The four of our troops-mine, Matthew's, Torway's, and Haro's- were at the northern entrance of the Woodlands. There was a high probability that we wouldn't make it in time from there. What I thought then was to send a sound signal to the other troops who were closer to you than we were and have them make haste for the west."

"…We couldn't make sense of it, but… that sound really was a signal…"

"Well if it were an Imperial-style signal, then it would also be transmitted to you people. That was a Kioka-style light signal translated into sound. It's something that I used to use with Yatori since a long time ago when we made mischief during lessons, and I was confident that I could transmit something in just about secrecy with it. Though after that, it was a tossup between whether their marching speed could overcome their time loss…With that, I've revealed how we cut you off, but you weren't able to move at top speed yourselves, were you?"

Ison nodded slightly. The desperate resistance from the members who had not betrayed Her Highness, the Princess, delayed the time of their transition from kidnapping to escaping. In addition to that, the feelings of guilt they had toward the act of kidnapping royalty slowed the feet of the members more than he had imagined.

"…I understand the majority of it. Then, my last question…Warrant Officer Yatorishino's platoon position was closer to ours, did you know that when you sent the signal? Or did you leave that to luck?"

“That was completely luck-I don’t intend to disappoint you by saying that. I knew.”

“…Why? Warrant Officer Yatorishino’s platoon should have been your enemy’s ally in the mock battle…”

“When I sent that signal, we had just finished the deciding battle at the northern entrance, and the enemy troops had become scattered as they withdrew. At that time, it was a theory that they headed for the ‘universal destination’ they’d previously established among their allies and refocus their forces. …And, I had an idea where the enemy’s ‘universal destination’ would be before the mock battle started.”

In the Southern Urt Woodlands, there aren’t many places in which three platoons numbering 120 people could assemble. The open area in the north was exemplary, but as the location where the confrontation of armies was expected to occur, that would be essentially inviting the enemy to please pursue them. A place with enough space for their entire army to assemble, but hidden so that it’d be difficult for the enemy to find them… in that case, the majority of prospects were unbalanced to the ‘’west or northwest’’ of the Woodlands.

“I couldn’t pin down for sure where it was, but that just that was enough this time. Since because they were at the west or northwest of the Woodlands, Yatori’s platoon was much closer to you than we were in the north. –That is all, there are no more secrets to disclose. Though it’s not much of a souvenir for the underworld.”

Ikta finished speaking without any sense of accomplishment. Captain Ison’s lips slowly curved.

“…Warrant Officer Solork… on the map inside of you, surely, the entirety of your own troops and those of your enemy continue to move in real time based on the rules of ‘possibility,’ right…?”

“…I would like to think so.”

“…I see, is that right? If that’s the case then I accept my loss… It seems that your way of thinking in regards to your tactics, is fundamentally the same as those of Lieutenant General Rikan. …It that really a coincidence…?”

“That’s-“

Not a coincidence- Ikta couldn’t say it. He couldn’t say that it was because Hazaaf Rikan was the great commander who had taken over Bada Sankrei’s role. That even if their times were different, they were comrades who carried in their chests an ideology from the same source- no matter what he couldn’t say it here.

The youth, who was supposed to say what he wanted to say when he wanted to say it, lost all words in the gap between what he wanted to bring to his mouth and what he wanted to keep secret.

“…, Ahh-…”

When Ikta, searching of words and being quiet for a long time, incidentally took notice, Captain Ison

was no longer breathing. The youth grit his teeth- even though he said that there were no strings attached to his compassion, ultimately he couldn't offer any suitable words even at the very end….

"Ik-kun, it's over. Come, everyone, let's go back."

Torway approached his back as he stood dead still, and lightly tapped his shoulder. By reflex, Ikta suddenly nodded. It seemed that, so much that he even wanted to return to that hateful military base, his heart had been exhausted.

"…Securing the accomplices, who are sure to be on the main road…"

"Our opponent's precise location, there are several…if we don't know any then it's difficult. It's not the work of troops in training."

"..I guess you're right. Let's hurry and go back, and complain about how our food never has any variety. …Ahh, these were a tiring two days. The time when we survived in Kioka was so much better than this."

By complaining and stretching, Ikta pulled himself together just a little. And, then finally, he looked for a certain someone's seated blood-spattered figure. Though she had entered his line of sight before then, she hadn't actually entered his consciousness.

"Ah- Yo, Princess. You've reinvented the flashy dress again. …Mm, or did you just magnificently spill tomato sauce on yourself? It's pret~ty hard to tell, you know."

Ikta recovered his usual groove. –However, he wasn't aware of it. Of how much he had ignored the princess's feelings thus far. Not hearing a single one of the words she wanted him to say to her, and being struck only with words she didn't want him to say, one wondered just what kind of state she was in right now.

"And by the way, I won't mention it anywhere else, but I'll tell you privately in secret…. Princess, right now, you're really red."

What am I going to do if this fails?- entirely not worrying about that before he spoke was one of Ikta's amazing points. And mysteriously, the joke he spit out in extreme situations, they had he strange effect of calming people's hearts. Well, that being said-.

"Wa….WaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

"H-Huh? Wh-Why!?"

"WAAAaaAAAAAHHHHH! Solork-SOLORK YOU MEANIEEE! MEANIEE! WaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

There were limits to this magic depending on the situation, the youth learned that here together with great consideration. Be he a genius or a hero, at the very least he was not omniscient.

Concerning the disastrous spectacle following Her Highness, the Princess explosion, it did not remain in records of the countless tragicomedies that were supposed to happen in that time. It was just a short scribble- “five hours until she cried herself out and fell asleep”- in the diary of only one person, Haroma Bekkel, but that might be an understatement of the fierceness of the final battle.

At any rate, among the endlessly tumultuous waters, the curtain closed on the first practice. After they received the report from Ikta and the others after they returned to the center base, several of the High Grade Military Officers who were involved with the body guard selection were fired. All of the perpetrators died, and even in the following investigation the full particulars of Captain Ison’s plan ultimately weren’t made clear.

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Yatori Igsem, who had upgraded the number of people she killed with her hands from one digit to two in a mere day.

After sleeping for one night, she completely recovered to her former condition, and returned to the base properly commanding her troops on the road back from the practice. Treating her life and death struggle with Captain Ison as a thing of the past and not drawing it out, she even clearly divided her complicated feelings about killing her compatriots between her ethics and responsibility as a soldier without regret.

The strength of her spirit, served to strengthen even further the faith the subordinates in her platoon held in her as a commander.

“….Hss…!”

However, in a part of herself that she didn’t show to her subordinates, there was an aspect of her that had changed. While wielding her two blades in an indoor training ground with no other sign of human life, Yatori was trying to recall the sensation from “that time.” …That, most likely, was because she thought that it was one “predicament.”

The memory of a sword fight carried out in a red haze. Excess thoughts vanishing from her oxygen-deprived mind, the existence called Yatori was purified into the blades she held in her hands. The blades which dashed ahead of her thoughts were shockingly efficient, and human minds might possibly think too much about things to manipulate simple tools such as swords- Yatori was in the process of reaching this unusual philosophic view.

“Myself, in essence a knight; a knight, in essence a sword; a sword, in essence myself-was it? There’s a small part I can’t understand, Father. The reason why the word, “human” isn’t included in that.”

Ending her usual introspection, Yatori sheathed her two swords in the scabbards on her hips. The fire

spirit Shia, who had been let down on the floor, watched her condition staring intently from afar, but — exceedingly rare for the reticent partner, he unexpectedly started a conversation with his master himself.

"-Yatori. Do you think that Shia is a flame?"

"…Huh? What nonsense are you saying? Shia is Shia, right? My one and only partner in the world."

Answering back without hesitation, Yatori walked toward her scene partner and picked up the small body. She made Shia's deep red head nod slightly.

"Then Shia doesn't think that Yatori is a sword either."

"…Thank you. For worrying about me."

For the partner whose forte wasn't complex phraseology, that was the best advice he could give. Yatori was grateful from her heart, and honestly accepted his consideration.

"I'm alright, really. I honestly don't know whether or not I'll be in that predicament again, but… This time, there was a guy who dragged me down in a second from the heights of my sword which I had finally reached."

Yatori faintly smiled. …After she cut down all enemies, most people hesitated to call out or get close to her. However, that was not the fear one held for a murderer; rather, was it not an expression of the awe one held for a drawn sword? That had the air of respect—only, held not for a human but for a sharp-edged sword.

Yatori didn't loathe being seen as a sword. To the contrary, that was exactly what she wanted. Therefore, she truly didn't harbor any ill will towards the people who couldn't approach her at that time. That was not only based on reasoning- she completely felt that way based on her emotions as well. That was the refreshing part of the human called Yatori.

However- when she thought of her companion who had walked up to her without wavering at that time and gently disconnected the swords which had bonded to the palms of her hands, there was no small number of things to think about. Warm feelings welled up in her chest.

"As long as I am by Ikta's side, it doesn't seem like I'll be able to completely turn into a sword. … Well, I suppose that's fine, too. I mean, swords don't have working mouths, and living on without playing the straight man to his antics is simply impossible for me."

Yatori left that place with seemingly joking but undoubtedly sincere final words.

-

At the same time, a youth, who not to the same degree as Yatori but nonetheless upgraded the number of people he killed with his hands by one, readied his air shooter in an indoor shooting range.

"…Whoosh…Whoosh…Whoo-!"

The carefully aimed shot pierced through distant, far-off targets one by one. –If he had been the Torway of old, this would have been when he would be conflicted: "Aren't I doing it wrong? Aren't I just afraid of the enemy getting close?" The sense of values planted in him like a curse by his older brother Sariha made him do that.

But, he used the real bullets which he habitually carried around as protection for his commander, and by shooting Captain Ison the moment he entered within range, he had saved Yatori's life as a result-this reality was big for him. The situation which continued to worry him until now, the reality that he had taken a single person's life, he could thrust it into a corner of his heart.

"…It's fine this way. Yes, it's better this way."

While peering through the sight of his air shooter, Torway came to terms with himself. –His weakness, that "his accuracy rate drops when the target is close," was quite visible in situations when his target was an animal, and especially when it was a human. In actuality, that was the result of his kind nature.

No matter what, he couldn't classify a being that was close enough for him to feel its presence as a "target." That's why his aim wavered. It's not as if everyone could live as refreshing a life as Yatori's, and with the impossibility of that exchange, Torway was more Yatori's antithesis than anything.

His kindness, which made the index finger wrapped around the trigger weaken when he was in front of an enemy, was of course undoubtedly a defect as a soldier. But, the Torway of the present had found the possibility of complementing it.

"I wonder why I hadn't realized it. …Until now, we had only thought of distance as an obstacle to shooting. But if you really think about it, isn't there more merit if there is a greater distance between you and your opponent?"

First, it is difficult for the enemy's bullets to hit you. Second, it is difficult your position to be discerned by your enemy. And third, due to the first and second reasons, ''you can approach shooting with peace of mind''. Torway thought that any one of them was too precious an advantage to give up. On the contrary, he even imagined that if he reached further with those as merits, ''might he not end up establishing a new branch of the army''?

"…This way of thinking, it will definitely add a new page to the history of "gun warfare." That is something I've always wished to do as a one of the Remeon Family. Of course, that won't change now. But…"

When his thoughts reached that point, there was something that Torway just couldn't help but thinking about. It was Ikta's goal, serving as supreme commander at the time of the mock battle, when he deployed Torway at the river crossing point upstream of the Kuriri River. Officially, his orders were, "when the enemy troops come here, aim at the enemy general and fire from the treetops." But thinking

about it now, ‘’he couldn’t believe that Ikta had estimated there being a high possibility of the leader of the enemy platoon passing through there.’’

“The one which would move to intercept my unit would likely be Yatori-san’s platoon- you had read that from the beginning. In that case, hadn’t you predicted that Yatori would leave her main force at a point midway, and send only scouts upstream?”

Upstream, Torway’s detached force killing of three enemy soldiers hadn’t served to contribute that great of an influence in the grand scheme of the war. If that was that case, then he thought that remaining at the river defense encampment and leading the platoons’ charge would have been much more effective. And that there was no doubt that Ikta had also come to this realization.

“…I wonder if I’m overthinking it…. But, no matter what, I have no choice but to think that your intention in deploying me upstream was to increase my ‘experience in shooting distant enemies.’ At the river defense encampment, after the general offensive had started there wouldn’t have been an opportunity for me to shoot at the enemy while keeping my distance. If Yatori’s intervention had come later then, it wouldn’t have been farfetched for the mock battle to have been settled right there. Therefore…”

Torway, who had stopped shooting and turned his body around, gazed far away at the barracks where they were lodging. First, he murmured his appreciation, and his awe amounting to double the former.

“Hey, Ik-kun…. My weaknesses and my worries, and the things I want to do… Even though until now I haven’t told you once to your face what they were.

Ever since a long time ago, you’ve understood everything, haven’t you…?”

-

Also at the same time, in the lounge of the barracks, Matthew Tetdrich and Haroma Bekkel were playing shogi face to face. Their abilities were on par with each other, and currently Matthew was somehow leading with three wins and two losses. This time, they were also deadlocked in a situation which didn’t allow either one to relax his or her guard, but….

“…Here, with a reverse checkmate, 5-8 Illumination battalion! With this it’s checkmate in three moves! No doubt about it!”

“You noticed that!? Ahh, umm….th-there’s nothing, I’ve lost…”

At Haro’s resignation, the round-faced youth huffed a sigh of relief. Though they were both warrant officers, that she- part of the Medics- fell behind in shogi had something to do with the Tetdrich Family’s reputation.

“And to think that I was the best at Nursing School…. Matthew-san, you’re really good at this, you know. I haven’t properly learned how to deal with established tactics.”

“Well, this is about as good as I am…. It’s frustrating that I can’t brag about winning against you,

Haro."

"All of a sudden you're kicking the loser while she's down!? Umm, if you're going to say that, then please challenge the Big Three! Ah, including Her Highness, the Princess, is it now the Big Four? Anyway, if you can win against any of them, then you can brag a whole lot!"

The term Big Three or Big Four was a ranking of shogi ability of those among the Order of Knights- or more precisely, it was a subdivision. Ikta, Yatori, Torway, Her Highness, Chamille- if those four, their winning rate aside, fought amongst each other, it would become "a true battle." When the two, Matthew and Haro, fought seriously with them, "the battle was a farce."

"The Big Four, huh…. Well, if even if the princess is a special case… the rest of them…"

Haro drew her eyebrows at the condition of Matthew, who was grumbling in a low voice while fiddling with a game piece in his hand.

"…Huh? It seems like, you've entered a relatively severe downer…?"

"…Not really, this isn't just limited to shogi, you know. You could say it's a more universal problem…Even you feel it, don't you, Haro? How do I put it, with them, umm, that…"

"? Umm…Ah! A difference in status, is it!?"

"That's right, but you should pay more attention to your slips of the tongue! Ikta, who does it consciously also come to mind, but since you're a natural airhead saying it without any ill will, I'm stuck on who to take my anger out on!"

"Ah, I-I'm sorry! I have this bad habit that, by the time I notice, my mouth has already rushed ahead, and…."

"I know that from experience, you know…. But, how do I put it? Since we're both already Warrant Officers in the High Grade Military Officer course and our contest to climb the ranks has started, you need to be less innocent."

Matthew spoke half shocked and half impressed. Haro tiled her head a little, then gave a wry smile.

"That's- If you say that kind of thing, it seems like I should be offended, but I don't really want to climb the ranks or anything, and…. Since with our current wages, I can send an allowance home…"

"Ahh, the way you said that, if I had heard that before the Exam I would have gotten angry. I would have shouted, 'With an incentive like that, go apply for a different job!'- probably."

"Ahaha…. Then, Matthew-san do you want to climb the ranks even now? To a general or to General of the Army?"

Beyond doubt Haro thought that he would answer immediately, but strangely Matthew drew his

eyebrows and hesitated to respond.

“Eh? M-Matthew-san…?”

“…I want to, you know. I want to climb the ranks. It’s frustrating that it doesn’t feel realistic, but I do want to become a general or the General of the Army. Since that’s why I took the High Grade Military Exam.”

He was a little late, but the answer she imagined did come back and Haro was relieved. However, from that moment, Matthew was somewhat fidgety and had lost his composure, and after five minutes passed he rose from his seat.

“Huh? Where are you going, Matthew-san? There’s still time until dinner, you know.”

“…Whenever I move, it’s necessarily because of my appetite?”

“Ah, um, was I wrong!?”

“…. I’m going to the Library of Military Annals. I want to investigate a little in detail about river defense encampments.”

“Ah, studying tactics? You really are diligent, aren’t you? Please do your best!”

Turning his back to the idiotic encouragement, Matthew left the lounge alone. His gait as he walked the corridor was strong, even rough, and in his round face, his eyes were tinged with the light of determination.

“I haven’t given up yet. Be it shogi, climbing the ranks, or status. I’m too young to be thinking crap like ‘this is my limit.’ There is the saying, great talents mature late. Even if tomorrow isn’t good enough, after one year, after five years, after 10 years- how things will turn out by then, no one knows that.”

Making the soldiers he passed by move aside with his intensity, he was riled up against an opponent who wasn’t there.

“Just watch me, Ikta, Yatori, Torway. I’ll win the next one. If I don’t, then I’ll win the one after. … Count on it- one day, I’ll show you the true power of Matthew Tetdrich!”

-

At the same time as Matthew’s inspiration, Ikta was standing at the north-most point of the center base. Alone in the darkness of night, he was standing still with an expression that told of boredom. He might have been waiting for someone, but his scene partner immediately appeared riding in a carriage.

“Don’t make me wait. Solork, board.”

Making the coachman open the door and seated inside the carriage herself, the princess called out to him. Ikta’s face distorted into a miserable one for an instant, but he entered into the carriage obediently without cracking any jokes.

“Look at your clothing- the collar of your shirt is twisted. There’s also sand stuck to your pants. Brush it off.”

“…Mm…”

“In the first place, your face is slovenly. Even if you can’t help that your looks are mediocre, there is practically none of what you’d call youthful ambition on your face. Even if I introduce this scrawny man as an ‘Imperial Knight,’ it will only be taken as a joke. Do you plan to embarrass me? Correct yourself at once.”

“…Mm…”

“Stiffen your lips more- straighten your spine and face forward. Rather straighten your back! Wear an aura of a gifted person overflowing with wisdom at a young age, express your highly perfect character that’s overflowing with gentlemanliness and chivalry with the color of your eyes! For goodness’ sake can’t you show some spirit without having to rely on the angelic Kusu!”

“Don’t list fundamentally impossible demands! Just how much of an unrivaled, all-rounder gentleman act are you going to demand from me!? Understand that Ikta-kun, no matter how much he dresses up, is still Ikta-kun!”

Ikta lashed back after his considerably unreasonable act, but seeing the princess’s shoulder tremble, he realized his blunder.

“Y-you disobeyed me… You disobeyed my orders… You have no intention of upholding your promise, do you…?”

“No, I do I do, I do intend to! For goodness’ sake, please say whatever you want- if it’s what you want I can straighten my back, see! If you tell me to, then I’ll even fire beams from my eyes!”

“Then cough up your heart from your mouth.”

“That’s telling me to die, isn’t it!? Surely, that wording is taking advantage of my mood right now, isn’t that it is!?”

Her moody saturation attack fatigued Ikta with great vigor. Five minutes after they departed, he had already completely used up all of his willpower and laid his body horizontally on the seat.

“This is tedious, amuse me more! “

“..I can’t give you a reaction anymore… Feel free to boil or burn me…”

“Oh? You said it. Then I’ll insult you as I like. This gutless, sophist, insensible, sex-crazed. ...Umm, uhh…”

“…Your Highness, it appears that your vocabulary is quite meager…”

“A-are you making fun of me?! It’s just that there are few words that describe you well! A-and, there’s one I have in reserve. I thought that if I said it, you’d definitely become angry, so I restrained myself, but if you’re going to say that to me, then I’ll go and say it, too!”

“..Please. If it’s something to do with me, then say whatever…”

“…M-mother complex!”

Compared to how much she hesitated, what she said was anticlimactic. Covering her ears and shrinking in on herself, the princess timidly looked toward Ikta.

“….Y-you’re not angry?”

“No, even if I get angry or whatever, that’s the plain truth so I don’t feel insulted…”

“B-but, when I talked about your mother before this…”

“? …Ahh, you mean right after the conferring of decorations? That was because you, princess, brought up my mother’s name in an unpleasant context. Therefore, please stop insulting my mother. I made a promise, so I won’t get angry, but on the other hand, that’s because I can’t say a single thing back.”

Ikta wove his hand while sleeping. The “promise” that the two of them had been mentioning since earlier, was a bargaining chip which the youth had no choice but to play to make Her Highness quiet down from her grand explosion immediately following the kidnapping. Ikta had already been bound by his promise of, “I’ll listen to whatever you say for one month starting today,” for two weeks.

“…I won’t say anything. If you can’t answer me back, then I’d be troubled.”

She might have been afraid to harm her companion’s mood, but Her Highness, the Princess, suddenly became submissive and sunk into silence. A hush overcame the inside of the carriage. She had no desire at all to do anything about Ikta’s impudence.

“…Solork, please listen. I have something serious to say.”

The quality of her voice changed. She might have attained the mental preparation to break the ice in the silence until now, but the princess’s face was unusually serious. Not having a choice, Ikta also raised his upper body from the seat.

“My inviting you today, it was an invitation to the party taking place in the capital, but this conversation is the main point.”

"…"

"Including the incident of the attempted kidnapping, I have had my life saved by you three separate times. Of course, I am grateful, but… more than that, I feel as though I have no reason to hide anything from you anymore."

Hearing that introduction, Ikta snorted with a face that said he long been tired of waiting.

"Are you finally going to spill your tiny guts?"

"I don't think anything good will come of keeping you in suspense. However, postponing it so I could evaluate you was necessary. I didn't think that it would be over in just a few months, and was prepared to spend an entire year on it, but…"

Ikta stopped the princess, who was getting ready to cut directly to the crux of the matter, with one hand.

"Please wait. Before you go to the main point, there is something I want to ask first."

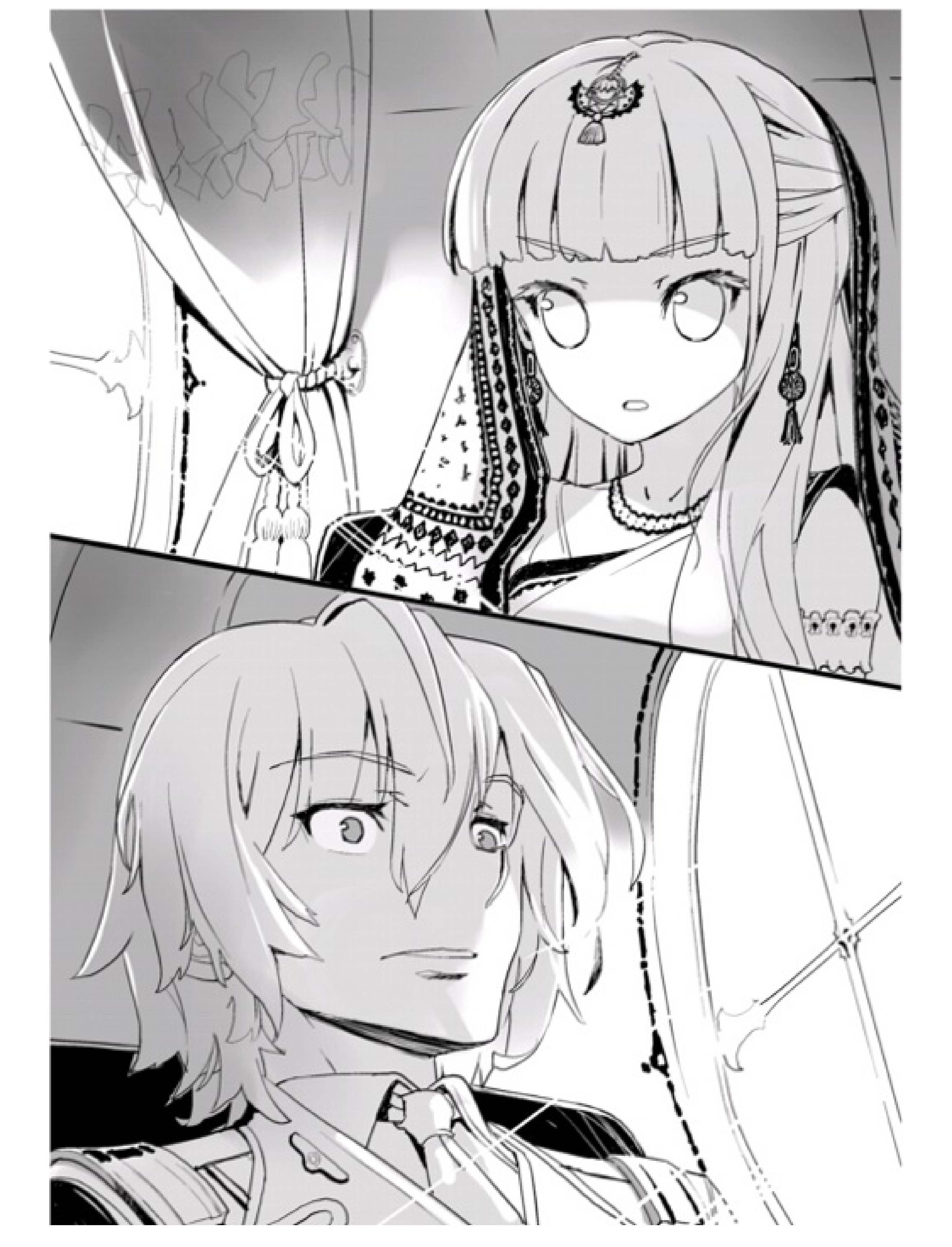
"…What's that?"

"This situation, we've been in it before, haven't we? After the unforgettable conferring of decorations at the Holy White Temple, we boarded a carriage together with you, and exchanged words in private."

"…So, what about that?"

"So what about that? -don't give me that. Something that was present then, that isn't here with us now, right?"

Not allowing the princess to talk her way out, Ikta questioned her clearly.



“Hey, Your Highness, why didn’t you invite Yatori here, too? If you’re saying that you have no reason to hide anything anymore because your life was saved, then no matter how I think about it, she should have been invited too. In other words, the one among us who most demonstrated her loyalty to you, is beyond doubt Yatori. Don’t tell me that you’ve forgotten that image.”

Remembering the image of Yatori as she stood motionless in a sea of blood with two blades in hand, Her Highness the Princess bit her lip looking ashamed.

“…That’s right, Yatori is a loyal soldier in the true sense. I learned of that firsthand during that incident. …However, for that very reason, I can’t invite her to this place.”

“I’m unfit to be a loyal soldier or something, so you want to have me assist you? So that’s it, I’m satisfied.”

Ikta lashed out with cruel sarcasm. The princess shook her head sideways with her face on the verge of tears.

“You’re wrong, that’s not it…! That you’re a talented person turned to dirty work or anything, I haven’t thought that even once! Rather it’s the opposite- you have purity of a kind other than Yatori’s! That’s what I…!”

“Well, it’s fine. I’m a human who just says what he wants to say one after the other. But, for some reason, it seems that there’s a part of me that Your Highness has bought. Let me hear your question.”

Ikta’s black eyes glared at his companion as if gauging her. The princess gulped loudly, and opened her heavy mouth.

“…You. What do you think of the current state of the Katjvarna Empire?”

“It’s in the latter half of its decline. If I put it simply.”

“That’s quite harsh. However, I completely agree. …Compared to its golden age over 100 years ago, our industry is running down over-all, our national power is weakening, and yet, out of balance, only our military power has been on the rise. And as the Empire has become thin and weak, the neighboring Kioka Republic has emerged and prospered.”

“The Kioka Republic has been handling both its internal and diplomatic affairs quite well. At the very least, the Empire’s cabinet is currently using its damned foolishness perfectly. The one who let Kioka, a small country which had originally seceded from the Empire, which had been no more than a small, weak country neighboring a powerful one, flourish thus far is in one sense the Empire itself.”

The princess put Ikta’s reasons for only making that judgment into words.

“’The definition of the government in the Katjvarna Empire is to compensate for the failures of the Cabinet through war.’”

“That’s a nice summary. Yes, that’s exactly right. If you recall the incident at the Eastern Stronghold

before this, it's easy to understand using that as an example. The Cabinet pushed their failure, 'failure in pioneering,' onto Kioka through some military tricks, the 'apparent defeat.' …So to speak, in this country, ''it's as if all of the debt ultimately circles around to the army.''"

"Yes. You might even call that their overarching principle… That's exactly why soldiers are valued in this country. Because they take on the responsibility of the political failures perpetrated by the Imperial Family, and bear the role of settling wars."

"For the Imperial Family, the Imperial Army is a convenient trash can that will automatically incinerate the garbage they throw into it. With this setup, statesmen don't have to take responsibility for the policies they enacted themselves. That's why it's corrupted. It's become so that whatever they do, they think that war will resolve it for them. The Cabinet had become a den of thieves for influential aristocrats who have nothing in their head except laying down commoners' clothing, and, making the emperor into a figurehead, growing old while not carrying out any of their responsibilities as leaders."

The princess nodded sharply. Scorn and hatred towards her biological father surfaced in her eyes.

"The current emperor- the human known as Emperor Arshankrut Kitora Katjvanmaninik, if he should completely cast off that emperor's crown, he would be nobody. He was just a depraved, dimwitted, and hot-tempered man. He might not have been that way at the beginning, but a life of addiction to wine and women corroded him from the marrow of his bones. Just by thinking that I'm the daughter of such a man, I start to feel sick, as if all of my blood is being corrupted…"

"That's not scientific. If there's just any part of a person that's corrupted while he or she is alive, that would be not the blood, but the mind."

Ikta finished speaking lightly, and the princess smiled at his refreshing humor.

"You haven't even met him, yet you say the same things…. No matter I express my thanks, I can't make you understand how much those words have lightened my heart…"

"Well, but that's not my accomplishment, it's that of science, see?"

"You didn't have to reject my thanks just then…. In any case, under the assumption that the Cabinet of the Katjvarna Empire is severely rotten, I would like to request your assistance."

At that point, Her Highness, Chamille, took a breath and started speaking after correcting her posture.

"Ikta Solork. –You, as a soldier, will ascend to the top of the Imperial Army."

"…"

"I know that this isn't something you want to do. However, I won't allow you to say that you can't. You have good instinct of military affairs- ''An overwhelming instinct'' at that."

The princess deliberately refrained from putting any more of her evaluation into words. Since the fact

that she was currently alive and breathing here was due more to the extraordinary quality of Ikta's abilities than anything.

He broke through the national border with his wits, led a captain on active duty by the nose through novel tactics, and foiled an attempted kidnapping by veteran soldiers by "reading" their higher dimensions of tactics. If a track record like this one didn't promise future distinction, then just how should people measure someone's ability?

"…That's absurd. This example ignores the current state of affairs at this time, but hypothetically if I keep rising until I become General of the Army, what would I do after that? You're not ordering me to stage a coup d'état against the Imperial Family, are you? In addition to soldier, nobleman, and hero, presenting me even with the honor of being 'dictator,' you're really too generous."

"No, we're not staging a coup d'état. I dislike dictators, and even if that succeeded, the interior of the Empire will end up as a political grey area. There's no way that the Kioka of present would let that prime opportunity pass."

"In any case, it seems you are slightly aware of reality. Then, please tell me, what would you make me do once I've climbed the ladder?"

"''I will have you lose a war.''"

The princess's immediate reply made Ikta stiffen for the first time. –This girl, what did she say just now?

"You will become a captain or General of the Army and command all of the forces of the Imperial Army, then having done that you will see to a decisive ''defeat'' in the war with Kioka. Absolutely not a victory- this must be a defeat. Why, because even if you are victorious, the Empire is already so organizationally weak that it's impossible for it to rebuild itself as a nation."

That instant, Ikta felt as if lighting had come down into his head. Among the shocks he received since his time as an apprentice to Anarai Khan, this paradigm shift[49] that had a considerably dynamic effect in life.

"…Your Highness. Basically, with a lost war-"

"Yes, we will save this country with a lost war. To say it more precisely, by means of the losing battle, the Kioka Republic's culture, economics, political philosophy- we will use the external pressure of all I mentioned to purify the Empire.

You might be hearing an impossible idea. Certainly, there has yet to be a country that has done this knowingly. However, historically there have been several precedents where countries have flourished as a result of a lost war. Which is why I can say that is a plausible method."

Ikta couldn't do anything but stare in mute amazement. …Certainly, like that very incident with Lieutenant General Hazaaf Rikan had been, there were examples of small military defeats being used

for political purposes in the Empire until now. But in the end, since those were limited to tactical and local defeats, ultimate victory was the hypothetical sacrificial pawn. In a manner of speaking, it was like abandoning your own rook in shogi and going for the enemy king.

However, Her Highness, the Princess's idea was different. That was an attempt at abandoning a victory on the surface of the board and trying to find a chance for victory off the board. Even in a normal war, strategy is in a higher dimension than tactics, and that structure approved of local defeats, but this princess, by placing politics in a higher dimension than strategy, was allowing even an ultimate defeat. She believed that the decisive defeat, which was an ''enormous sacrificial pawn'', would lead to victories in the distant future in regards to politics.

"…What do you plan to do about the Empire's native culture and nationality?! The treatment of the losing country is one of the things prescribed to the winning country, you know! When it comes to that, the Empire itself will become infinitely weak during its restoration!"

"Certainly that is true, but that is in the situation we should completely lose in war. If we meet defeat with plenty of reserve strength remaining, it would be possible to limit intervention from Kioka in the context of our military power. And Solork- what I want to request from you is exactly that."

"I-I can't win the war, and I can't lose the war without leaving enough strength for afterwards either? In other words, I-"

"''Lose skillfully'', Solork. For the sake of purifying the interior of the Empire, you will bring about a defeat that leaves a perfect amount of reserve strength so that the external pressure is increased moderately, and so that we can limit the interference from Kioka even after we lose.

You are the only one who can take on this role. It's not just a question about plain military ability- Ikta Solork, your spirituality, detested by soldiers, nobles, and royalty alike, is essential. For example even if Yatori has the same ability as you do, I can't entrust her with this role. She is a soldier by nature. Her genuine desire to shoot down the enemy and protect her country will never change. The very idea of using a lost war to benefit the country is sadly inconsistent with her way of life."

Ikta felt goosebumps rise throughout his body. –Uncommon. In this age, in this country, Her Highness, the Princess's idea was very uncommon. But in a way, it was adjacent to the Empire's corruption. Because, even the princess's plan to "save the country with a lost war" was in essence the same thing as the Empire's abnormal political inclination towards "actions that compensate for the failures of the Cabinet with a lost war."

"This body is no more than a figurehead princess who owns not even a piece of this territory. I currently don't have the official authority to interfere with politics or the army. That is something I must have you obtain. The only thing I can do is lay the groundwork. Truthfully, we have no flexibility in terms of time. –Seeing as the reigning emperor, who continues his decadent lifestyle, is getting weaker by the day, we don't know when he will succumb to illness. It likely won't even be 10 years. Five years or six years, it might be much shorter than that…. If it comes to that, the parasites nesting in the Cabinet will support you Knights as candidates for Emperor, and it isn't difficult to imagine that that they will incite a violent civil war. Since even that one thing is a difficult national crisis to

overcome, Kioka might also take our political chaos as a good opportunity and come at us with a full-fledged attack. We will be attacked with a threat from the outside…Before that happens, you must rush to the top of the army."

Be it five years or be it six years, Ikta would still be in his early twenties. There was no precedent of a captain of General of the Army that young in the Imperial Army. Rather, no one would object if someone were to pronounce it impossible.

In spite of that, the princess was telling him to do it. She firmly believed that it was possible for the youth before her eyes. Ikta grit his teeth. For him, creating this one-sided faith was a mistake he could never stop regretting.

"…Your Highness…you… where did you get that idea? In the Empire, no matter how twisted your mind is, it isn't a motif that comes up. Say that there is ground that will nourish a reversal of that sort of thinking, that's not in the Empire but in-"

She couldn't possibly- this epiphany came down onto Ikta. The princess affirmed it with an immediate reply. "Yes. It's something that's hidden from the citizens, but I've lived on Kioka soil for the months and years from when I was three to when I was 11 years old. To guarantee the cease-fire conditions between both countries, I was given to them as a political hostage."

"…! …That motif, it's an amalgamation of Imperial and Kiokan styles?!"

Her Highness, Chamille brought her face close to Ikta's, who was staring at her dumbfounded, so that their noses were almost touching. And, she filled her next words with the all of the determination that she accumulated in her not very long lifetime.

"Crush the long-cherished desire of soldiers underfoot, throw off your allegiance to the Imperial Family, betray every last bit of the trust you've received as a hero with that single defeat. –What do you say? There is no greater nor more fateful casting for you- who hates everything to do with soldiers, the Imperial Family, and heroes- than the one I am offering you!"

"……!"

"Be troubled no more, Ikta Solork, fight together with me until we lose! At any rate, can a twisted person like you ever go to the heaven spoken of by the Church of Alderah!? Then, let accompanying me to the depths of hell and leaving it be the same thing! I have already determined to be your partner on the road to Hades- I won't start to complain now!"

This theatrical persuasion threw all logic to the wind, but Ikta gave no objection from his seat. The moment he couldn't reject the princess's plan as "worthless," he'd probably already been caught by destiny.

Thus, the story began in the true sense of the word. "The skilled manager of the invincible status quo" Ikta Solork, and "the last princess of the Katjvarna Empire" Chamille Kitora Katjvanmaninik. These



two lined up together and ran at full speed toward the next battle of their promised defeat.

Epilogue

Under a perfectly clear, cloudless night sky, a lone old man dressed in a white lab coat stood motionless.

The light he held in his hand was not a light spirit but an oil lamp. Currently, he was blocking even its weak light by holding out his hand. What he wanted to see was not at his feet where the lamp light could reach, but something which, while being in a complete opposite position, also required no light to observe.

“Wait a minute, Professor Anarai, if you’re outside at a time like this you’ll catch a cold!”

Suspicious of the condition of the old man, who wasn’t so much as shivering as he stood, a young man in a white lab coat came running out of a house. …Compared to the land of intense heat where they had lived previously, the night air here was a bit colder. Since his body hadn’t become accustomed to the climate, he was worried for Anarai’s health.

“Oh, Bajin. Calm down, I’ll return shortly.”

“…Ahh, were you observing the sky? It is quite clear today, isn’t it? So, which star do you have your sights on? Or is it the moon?”

“A star. One that definitely won’t disappear for another thousand years.”

From that strange phrasing, and the direction of Anarai’s gaze, Bajin quickly pinned it down.

“Alderamin[50] …right?”

“…Brrr! Hey, stop that, Bajin, simply call it the North Star. You’ll bring back memories of those abominable inquisitors from the Alderah Church.”

Saying that, Anarai finally returned back to the house. No matter how much time passes, he’s as moody as ever- thinking that, Bajin followed after him.

The new laboratory which the Kioka government gave them was no more than a single house, but for the two of them it was paradise on Earth where they could live without being intimate with mold or dust. Just with that, Bajin was ready to recognize his patriotism to Kioka, but Anarai was contrarily bold.

“Kah- those people in the government. They sent us a refusal!”

While rummaging on his desk through postal items recovered from the mailbox, Anarai suddenly growled. Inferring the situation, Bajin shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

“Is it the experiment from earlier? Well, no matter how large Kioka’s wallet may be, they won’t give us permission, you know.”

“What? Don’t you want to do it, Bajin?”

“…It’s hard to say. As a researcher I want to, but as a human being I don’t. At any rate, there will be opposition, you know, ‘’against spirit dissection’’.”

Anarai scoffed. –Yes, what this old professor had requested permission from the government for, was the dissection of the four great spirits. Of course he would use empty shells without “soul stones,” but even in the Kioka Republic, a country zealously founded on technology, permission wouldn’t be granted so easily.

“There’s nothing we can do about it. A state religion isn’t specified as it is in the Empire, but over 80% of even Kioka’s citizens are adherents to the Alderah Church. Even if the separation of church and state is more or less making progress, the commandments of the Alderah Church will nonetheless influence law.”

“What I want to say is much more fundamental. Why is it, that ‘human dissection’ is allowed if permission was received while the person was alive, but only ‘spirit dissection’ isn’t allowed? Unlike humans who die permanently, a spirit is immortal if you bring its ‘soul stone’ to the ‘Sanctum’, isn’t it?”

I understand your logic, but… Bajin’s face said everything with a wry smile. Anarai sank into silence, one might think because he were sulking, but suddenly he stood from his chair and moved to a corner of the room. What were lined up there, resembling the things from their previous laboratory, were life-sized models of the four great spirits.

“Hey, professor, stop putting it off and just tell me. What is the purpose of creating those ‘artificial spirits’?”

“I shan’t tell an unworthy disciple.”

“Ah- so cruel! If I, who has followed you so far, am an unworthy disciple, then you’ll never find a worthy disciple no matter where you search in the world!”

Bajin began sorting through scattered documents while voicing his anger. Catching glimpses of him from the corner of his eye, Anarai began talking in a quiet voice.

“Listen, Bajin. This is just a feeling, but don’t you think free will is characteristic to all living things?”

“-Huh? ‘Free will,’ you say?”

“Yes. Or not adhering to another’s will…shall I say? For example, wild animals once used to attack humans. In order to control that, we had to use traps and weapons to fight. Even when we lured them with a smile, they wouldn’t lower they guard that easily. That’s free will, right?”

"Huh…"

"However, when they became livestock and pets, things changed a bit. They became emotionally attached to humans and fawned over us. They would give us a front paw when we say 'shake,' and lay bare their genital organs when we say 'beg.' Of course livestock and pets are existences which have meaning in our lives, but that aside, they no longer have 'free will,' do they?"

"Since they are living things without free will, they are beneficial existences to humanity… is that it?"

"Yes. If 'free will' is the essence of living things, then I believe that 'benefit to humanity' is the essence of artificial things. And, when you observe them keeping that in mind…"

Anarai gazed at the models before his eyes one-by-one. The fire spirit which simply produced fire for us, the water spirit which always prepared clean water for us, the wind spirit which kept air pure, and the light spirit which became our light in the dark nights….

"…These existences which are so beneficial to humanity, humans' good partners without a fragment of free will, can we really call them living things?"

Taking those words in, Bajin finally understood Anarai's reason for creating "artificial spirits."

"Professor Anarai, basically…As means of proof that spirits are artificial lifeforms, you're reproducing spirits by your own hand?"

"I'm well aware that this is far from being absolute proof. Since being able to create them doesn't mean that I am able to create the same thing God purportedly created. …However, in that case, I'd be satisfied if only a fraction of people are able to cast doubt on it."

A human's efforts were able to reproduce them to this extent. One hundred years later, two hundred years later, it might come even closer to the original. One he thought of it that way, people who'd come to that idea would certainly arise. …Wait. If a human hand was able to reproduce them to this extent, then ''might not there be the possibility that humans created the original in the first place?''

"However, spirits are born at the 'Sanctum.' I hear that their mysterious institution existed even before it came be recorded in history. Isn't there no way that the humans of that era were able to create something that even Professor Anarai of the current era can't adequately reproduce?"

"It's exactly as you say. Therefore… I think that if there were humans who created them, then wouldn't they be a race of humanity without any direct connections to us? They might have ''failed to connect with us'', or even have ''wanted to deliberately cut ties''…whichever it is, I believe that the thing which they left to us as a single precious legacy- might it not be, basically, it the four great spirits?"

"That's magnificent. With your logic, that would mean that at a time that came far, far earlier than our civilization, people existed who possessed technology far more advanced than ours. Could we call it a super ancient civilization?"

“Hm, that naming isn’t terrible. –Alright, it’s settled then. Henceforth, we shall identify our various pursuits concerning the ‘Manufacturers of the Four Great Spirits’ by calling them our ‘Discourse on the Super Ancient Civilization’!”

Perhaps because he was thrilled at having assigned a name to his hypothesis, Anarai had suddenly entered a good mood, and began taking the models into his hands. Bajin showed a wry smile and stared at the back of the old man’s snowy head.

No matter which country or place they came to, he rushed on seeking truth without care for law, government, God, or time. Professor Anarai Khan’s intellect was beloved by freedom. Quite possibly, from the perspective of another of the many geniuses, that might have been a very enviable thing.

<END>

Afterword

Hello to those who have been here from the start, and to those who haven't. My name is Uno Bokuto.

This is quite sudden, everyone, but do you look at the stars?

They're nice, aren't they, stars? Even if we are apart now, we are watching the same stars. That makes your heart skip a beat, doesn't it?

…Huh, what's that? If we're too far apart to the north and south, the stars we can see are completely different, you say? HAHAHA, well well, just ignore that kind of boorish reality. Please ignore it. Let's ignore it.

Anyway, a star's brightness is a very widespread and long-lived indicator for humanity. Even if it's not perfect, there's the sense of security that they have remained in the night sky for a time far surpassing the long time we have spent in this world. In the present and in the past, we may have been charmed by this fact, no?

However, even these stars cannot help but seem irrelevant to the flow of time when you view them on a large scale. For example the North Star. That which we look up to in the night sky is a star officially called Alpha Ursae Minoris, or Polaris. It has been pointing to the North Pole of the heavens for a slightly over 1,000 years already.

From our perspective, who don't even live 100 years, that's a length of time we might take to be eternity, but even that star is slowly reaching its end. Even a single star can't remain in the center of the celestial sphere for eternity.

Therefore, after that has passed, just how many stars in this world will be born, shine, and disappear? Just how much of their memories have people preserved? It's a grand tale, isn't it?

…Ah, no, that's not it. This isn't a screening of Proj ○ ct X.

Let's end our chatting here, and acknowledge the people to whom I'm much obliged for my writing career.

First, my illustrator, Sanba Sou-san. When you first completed an illustration of the protagonist, I truly thought it was strange how I was blessed by my artist. Thank you for your splendid drawings. Please continue to work with me on this series in the future.

Next, Kurosaki-san, who has done me the favor of becoming my editor from this work onwards. Thank you for always giving me precise suggestions. I apologize for recently having you push back all of my deadlines.

My friend M-kun. One thing or another, for better or for worse, please continue to be my friend in the future. Also, try your best in your job search, try your very best.

Lastly, to you, the one who has taken this book into your hands, all or nothing, I thank you with my body and soul.

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ written as: 戯画化 (caricaturization); read as: デフォルメ (deformation)
2. ↑ proverb: 転ばぬ先の杖 (A stitch in time saves nine, prevention is better than the cure)
3. ↑ written as: 酒精 (wine spirits/ethyl alcohol); read as: アルコール (alcohol)
4. ↑ written as: 帝國 (Empire); read as: ウチ（we, us)
5. ↑ text: 買いかぶりすぎ (overestimating -someone- too much); homonym: 貝かぶりすぎ (wearing too many clams -on one's head-)
6. ↑ proverb: 毒を以て毒を制する (fighting fire with fire)
7. ↑ 176cm is approximately 5'9
8. ↑ 8.0 8.1 イケメン (ikemen) can refer to a man that is either good-looking or exceptionally ugly
9. ↑ 9.0 9.1 9.2 idiom: でかい顔する (to act arrogant); text 7.0: でかい顔はさせない (not allow to act arrogant); text 7.1: 顔が体積的に一番大きい (uses different vocabulary from the idiom; literally: in terms of volume, your face is largest); text 7.2: ...顔...おれの顔...そんなにでかいか... (uses same vocabulary as idiom; literally: ...face...my face...is it that big?)
10. ↑ written as: 猛禽 (birds of prey); read as: ハンター (hunter)
11. ↑ generally, the two members of a comedy duo are known as the straight man（突っ込み／ツッコミ）and the funny man （惚け／呆け／ボケ）
12. ↑ written as: 同時処理 (simultaneous processing); read as: マルチタスク (multitask)
13. ↑ text: 聖典 (Scriptures); homonym: 晴天 (good weather)
14. ↑ written as: 凝集光 (concentrated gathered light); read as: ハイビーム (high beam)
15. ↑ text: 人事は尽くしている; proverb: 人事を尽くして天命をまつ (Man proposes, God disposes; Do your best and let the heavens do the rest; literally: devote yourself and wait for destiny)
16. ↑ written as: 光明 (bright light); read as: みち (path, road)
17. ↑ 数えで (old method of counting age where newborns are considered one year old, and years are added at every New Year)
18. ↑ written as: 永霊樹 (Eternal Spirit Tree); read as: カトヴァンマニニク (Katjvanmaninik)
19. ↑ written as: ツッコミ役 (straight man role); read as: ヤトリ (Yatori); generally, the two members of a comedy duo are known as the straight man（ツッコミ）and the funny man （ボケ）
20. ↑ written as: 精霊 (spirit); read as: パートナー (partner)
21. ↑ written as: 帝国 (Empire); read as: くに ((mother) country)
22. ↑ written as: 捕虜 (prisoners of war); read as: こっち (this direction/one)
23. ↑ written as: 帝国 (Empire); read as: ウチ (we, us)
24. ↑ written as: 吊るし式寝具 (hanging-style bedding); read as: ハンモック (hammock)
25. ↑ written as:気嚢 (air bladder); read as:ドーム (dome)
26. ↑ written as:火精霊 (fire spirit); read as: シア (Shia)
27. ↑ written as:主 (master); read as:私 (I, me)
28. ↑ read as 揚気 (rising air); read as: ガス (gas)
29. ↑ written as: 重り (weight); read as: バラスト (ballast)
30. ↑ rear guard: the soldiers positioned at the rear of a body of troops, especially those protecting an army when it is in retreat

31. ↑ written as: 帝都 (capital); read as: ここ (here)
32. ↑ chamberlain: one who manages a household
33. ↑ 貴族院 (House of Lords) The upper house of Parliament in the UK (the lower house is the House of Commons).
34. ↑ the alcoholic kind
35. ↑ written as:弩弓 (crossbow) read as:ボウガン (bow gun)
36. ↑ written as:オチ (flaw/punch line)
37. ↑ written as: 黒石板 (black stone tablet); read as: ノート (notebook)
38. ↑ idiom:借りてきた猫のように – like a borrowed cat, referring to how cats are timid in a new environment, such as when they are "borrowed" and taken somewhere else
39. ↑ written as:サリハ大尉(Captain Sariha); read as: あのひと (that person)
40. ↑ Ikta and Yatori are playing as a tag team, and the "touch" a few lines earlier was Ikta tagging Yatori in
41. ↑ idiom:言わぬが花 (Not saying is a flower)
42. ↑ written as: 娘さん(her daughter); read as: スーヤ(Suuya)
43. ↑ written as: トルウェイ (Torway); read as: ライバル(rival)
44. ↑ a Japanese word chain game, in which the last syllable of one word is used as the first syllable of the next
45. ↑ Kusu's responses, seeing as they're not especially significant, were changed to fit the pattern for the game. Their actual exchange is as follows: うるさがた(nitpicker)＞たまご(egg)＞強情娘（ごうじょうむすめ）(Stubborn daughter)＞めだか (killifish)＞過去（かこ）にこだわる (fixated on the past)＞るり(laps lazuli)＞倫理的に狭量（りんりてきにじょうりょう）(ethically narrowminded)＞うさぎ(rabbit)＞義理の娘といえなくも（ぎりのむすめといえなくも）(could even call her my step daughter)＞もうふ(blanket)＞ふ？
46. ↑ written as: おあそび(game); read as:模擬戦(mock battle)
47. ↑ written as: ヤトリ(Yatori); read as: あれ(that)
48. ↑ science is written as 科学 and theology is written as 神学. The author calls them similar because the second character is the same, but that similarity doesn't translate well into English.
49. ↑ written as: 認識転換 (change in awareness); read as: パラダイムシフト(paradigm shift)
50. ↑ written as: 主神星 (chief god star); read as: アルデラミン (Alderamin)